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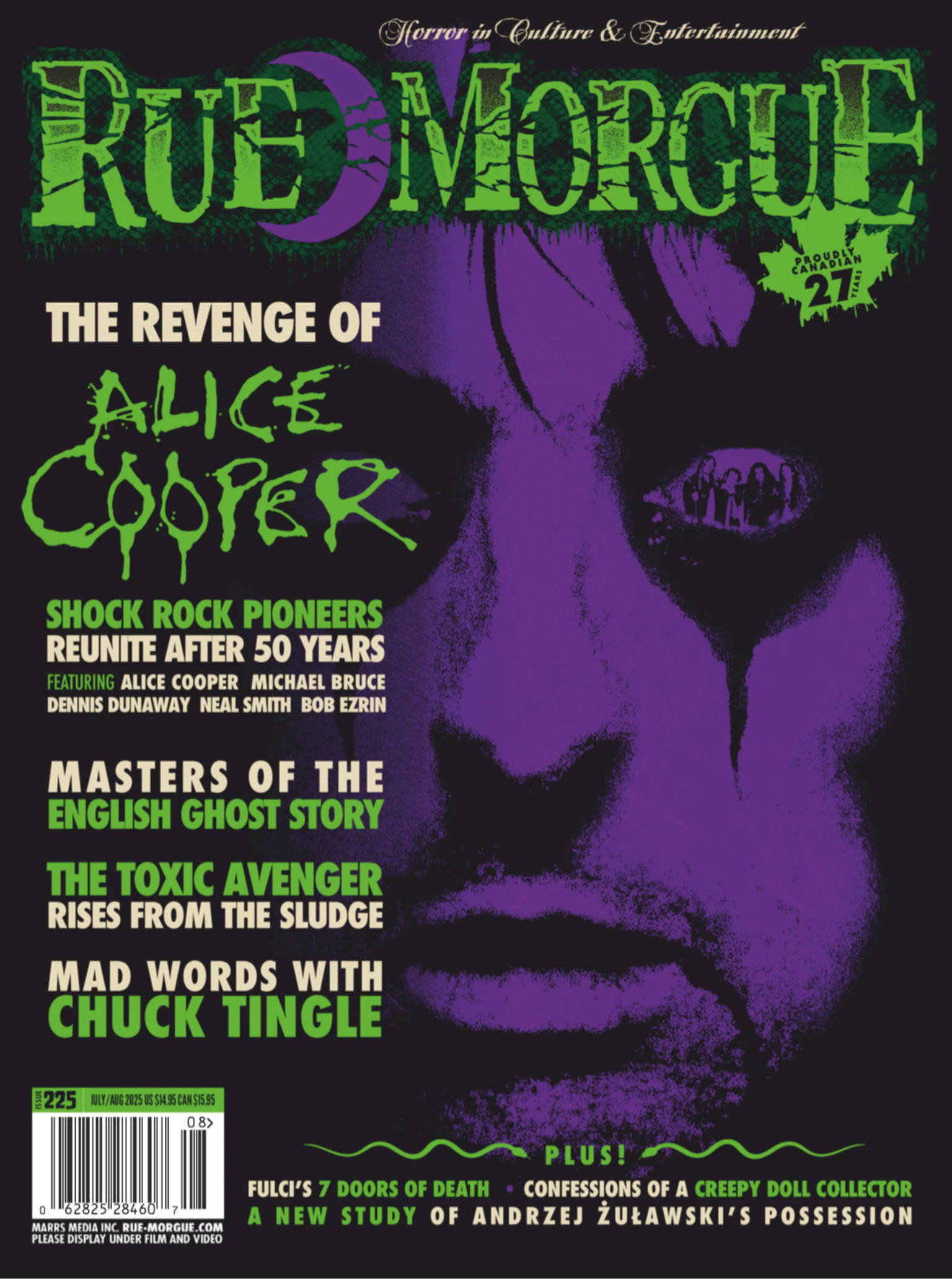

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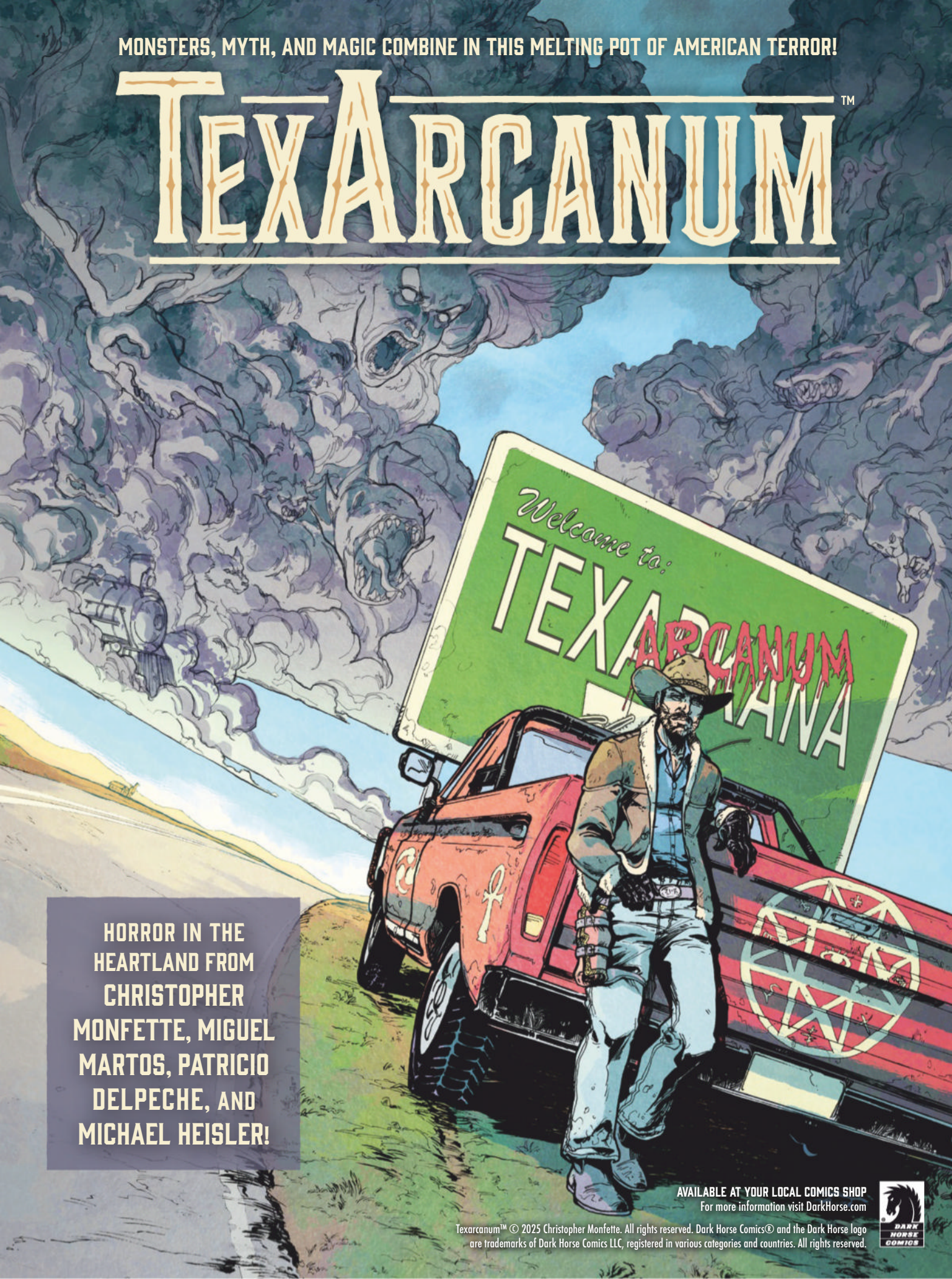
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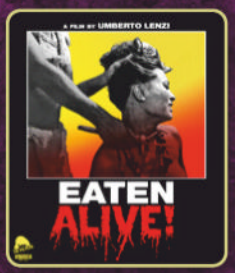

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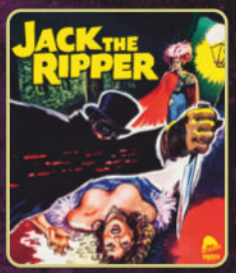

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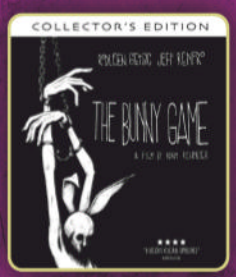

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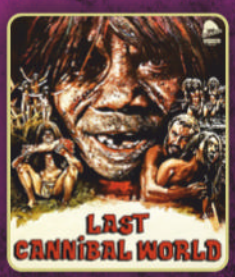

LAST CANNIBAL WORLD

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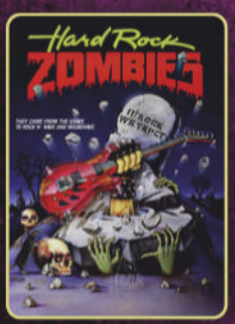

HARD ROCK ZOMBIES

A freshly-out-of-the-grave band of Hard Rock Zombies is thirsting to take their sweet revenge, as they give the performance of a lifetime.

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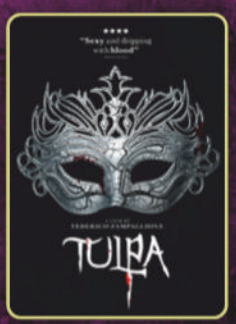

TULPA: DEMON OF DESIRE

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RUE MORGUE

JULY/AUGUST 2025 #225

12 **THE REVENGE OF ALICE COOPER**

Before he became a shock rock superstar, Alice Cooper was a band renowned for blasting taboos with its fusion of glam rock and over-the-top horror theatrics. Now, after five long decades, the original lineup reunites for a triumphant return.

PLUS! Legendary producer Bob Ezrin returns to the shock rock group he had a hand in creating.

by **AARON VON LUPTON**

20 **GHOSTLY GRANDMASTERS**

On the occasion of his upcoming book, *Spectral Lights*, *Rue Morgue*'s Dejan Ognjanović gives a short masterclass on the masters of the English ghost story

PLUS! Legendary horror fiction writer Ramsey Campbell on the classic ghost stories of England's past.

by **DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ**

26 **TOXIE'S TRIUMPH**

Legendary Pictures, creators of a big budget monsterverse populated by a trio of *Godzilla* films and the *Jurassic World* franchise, has flexed its mighty muscle to reboot a 40-year-old superhero black comedy splatterfest… *The Toxic Avenger*.

by **JOHN W. BOWEN**

30 **FEAR IS REAL**

A cosmic event that turns cisgender heterosexual people into bloodthirsty rage zombies; a gay conversion camp where demon possession bolsters its one-hundred-percent effectiveness rate... Welcome to the mad world of Chuck Tingle.

by **ROCCO T. THOMPSON**

DEPARTMENTS

NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND 6
The Longest Walk.

POST-MORTEM 7
Letters from fans, readers, and weirdos.

THE CORONER'S REPORT 8
Weird Stats & Morbid Facts, Expiring Minds, Shadowland, and more!

NEEDFUL THINGS 10
Strange trinkets from our bazaar of the bizarre.

CINEMACABRE 32
The newest films reviewed, featuring *Hell House LLC: Lineage*.

REISSUED & REANIMATED 40
REVIVED: Fulci's *7 Doors of Death*.

BOWEN'S BASEMENT 42
DUG UP: *Humanoids From the Deep* (1996).

THE GHOUL NEXT DOOR 44
ODDITY: Creepy Doll Collecting.

BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS 46
INKED IN: Adam Carter and Armin Ozdik's *Betweeners*.

THE NINTH CIRCLE 48
SPOTLIGHT: *Possession: Dreams of Suffering and Sanity*.

THE FRIGHT GALLERY 52
ON DISPLAY: The Menacing Street Art of Jamie Paul Scanlon.

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS 54
CURIO: The Tall Man's Spheres Turn Blue.

AUDIO DROME 57
NOW PLAYING: *The Devil and Daisy Dirt*.

PLAY DEAD 60
FEATURING: *Ghost Frequency* and *Moroi*.

VS 62
DEBATE: Are ghost stories better suited to fiction or film?

NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND

So, I've been thinking a bit about death lately. Not in the sense that my own is especially imminent or anything (although tomorrow is promised to no one, don't forget, and I've somehow started smoking *again*), but this issue contains another obit, another dedication, another one for the fire, to use an indelicate horror idiom. (From *Night of the Living Dead*, get it? You have to get it or else I'm a major asshole.)

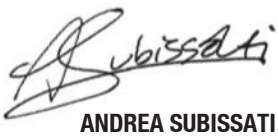
Adam Lopez was a key figure to me as I entered Toronto's horror scene. The Toronto After Dark Film Festival was perfect for a newcomer to the city – solid fright flicks at a cozy rep cinema without all of the Toronto International Film Festival's tedious lineups, industry human centipedes, and celebrity shunts. In fact, Adam was one of my first interviews for this here magazine; I remember preparing my questions about TAD's upcoming lineup and worrying about getting all the info for a half-page news feature. But I needn't have fretted – horror love flows from that guy so readily that every metaphor I can think of to describe it is a little obscene. Suffice it to say, Adam loved horror and he loved life and he wasn't shy about screaming it from the rooftops.

So perhaps it was simply on brand for him that, when faced with an ominous cancer diagnosis three years ago, he tackled the whole ordeal quite publicly on Facebook, and always with his trademark unflappable optimism. He kept us all posted, whether things looked good or grim. He described his many treatments and their effects on him physically and mentally. He celebrated holidays with costumes and consistently posted selfies with his wife and daughter. And so, when he finally passed on April 8, 2025, I think there was an extra element of shock that he lost that battle because he generally made it look like he was winning.

But what is winning when it comes to death, anyway? I've recently started listening to the audiobook for Richard Bachman's *The Long Walk* (on a long drive, ironically), in which a hundred male teenagers are forced to walk themselves to death until there's only one left standing. Told from the POV of contestant Ray Garraty, the book rings of post-war ruminations on the sort of patriotism that demands meaningless sacrifice and marching on when the odds of seeing dawn are decidedly slim. Garraty sees fellow contestants collapse in seizure, flee for the woods, beg for mercy; all to the same grim result. And all he can do to keep himself sane is contemplate what dignity he might be able to muster when his time comes.

Even at his tender age, Garraty understands that he won't *truly* know the answer until his legs finally give out. And similarly, when I wonder what I might do if/when the stupidity of smoking inevitably results in a terminal diagnosis at last, I can't be sure I'd face it with Adam's inspiring bravery. Maybe I'd keep it private, like author Nancy Kilpatrick, who Monica memorializes in this issue's Library of the Damned. Maybe I'd slink off and hide like a sick cat, wasting away unnoticed while neighbours ignore Dante barking his grief, having long cried that wolf to death by now. Maybe I'd fake my own sudden demise so I could sit back and watch the obits roll in, take stock of the most performative mourners, and update my will and testament accordingly.

I'm making jokes because that's what I do when I'm uncomfortable with being too real, and maybe that's the best indicator of how I'll approach something as unserious as my own demise; in fact, "Another one for the fire" would make a great epitaph for yours ghouly. My sincerest condolences go out to the Lopez family, and to Nancy's community of fans and peers. And as for you, wretched readers: better start on material for my memorial roast now – you never know when the time will come.



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RUE MORGUE #225 would not have been possible without the valuable assistance of Sergei Titukh, Black Veil Studio, Toby Mamis, and Al McMullan.

RUE MORGUE #225 is dedicated to the memory of Adam Lopez and Nancy Kilpatrick, who brought so much to the horror community, in Toronto and abroad. R.I.P.

Cover: Alice Cooper
Design by Shane Mills

We acknowledge the land that *Rue Morgue* is created upon is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

Rue Morgue magazine is published bi-monthly and accepts no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts, photos, art or other materials. Freelance inquiries can be submitted at Rue-Morgue.com.

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POST MORTEM

COMMENTS • QUESTIONS • CRITICISM

I WAS JUST SO DELIGHTED to see the final showdown of *RM#224* consider *Rock 'N' Roll Nightmare* (a.k.a *The Edge of Hell*) as a true contender. It's not every satanic panic rock horror film that reverses pretty much every assumption of the genre, up to making the heavy metal hero a literal angel who just wants to wrassle puppet Satan. If I'm trying to sell my friends on a Can-Con evening, gore splattered over a bit of a bleak meditation on small town poverty is never going to stand up to the winning words "musical with equal opportunity mammary glands and PUPPET. SATAN." We're here for a good time, even if this requires acknowledging Markham, Ontario, existing.

ANNE MILLAR, VIA EMAIL

I BUY *RUE MORGUE* at my local USA Barnes and Noble. My friend who works there told me it is going to cost more because of copies shipping from Canada to your U.S. distributor with added tariffs. Please note that myself and many other U.S. readers I have talked with online will not be buying the magazine anymore.

SIMON MOODY – ADDRESS WITHHELD

Like everyone else, we at Rue Morgue *are concerned about how the tariffs will impact our American readers, which is why we have decided to shoulder the extra cost for the time being. Of course, the best way around tariffs is to subscribe; it helps us tremendously, plus you are guaranteed to receive every issue prior to newsstands at a fraction of the cover price! – Ed.*

AS SOMEONE who grew up on *Famous Monsters* (and actually met Forry): love your mag – keep up the great work.

RICHARD DRACHTMAN, VIA EMAIL

I JUST RETURNED from three months travel in Asia (I know, life's tough), so I'll be reading through the issues sent earlier in the year. I recall that a number of years ago, you guys published lists of upcoming international film festivals of a genre nature as well as international comic cons. This list usually came out in the end-of-year issue or January's issue. Have I overlooked these somehow? (It's not easy getting older!) Do you not publish the lists anymore? I ask because now that I'm retired, I want to include in my travels to distant shores some of these film festivals, such as the Sitges, Porto, Busan, etc. Warm regards always and keep up the good work. I look forward to each and every issue.

PETE VON PAPPEN, VIA EMAIL

We stopped publishing our annual convention lists a few years ago. It was getting harder and harder to find accurate dates far in advance, so the list was becoming a little too "TBA"-heavy to be very useful. Google should do the job! – Ed.

SNAGGED THE LAST COPY of *Rue Morgue* right before the movie!

@DALIROSETETREAULT1, VIA INSTAGRAM

TONY TODD was an absolute beast of an actor and gentleman. I got an opportunity to meet him during the filming of *Candyman*. Great article, as always!

JEFFREY LEBLANC, VIA EMAIL

RE: *ANDREA BREAKS HER BRAIN* *Answering Your Questions* on *Rue Morgue TV* – Please more of this! A few questions a week? No need for big production. Just love the live Q&A. My first horror transformation was *The Gate*. "You've been bad!" from Dad as the phone melts was a whole thing. And *here* we are.

@STEMAGE, VIA YOUTUBE

RE: *HORROR MUSIC ON LP,* *Soundtrack, and 7-Inch* on *Rue Morgue TV* – This show is long overdue on the channel. The first episode was awesome, and I cannot wait for the next one. Please make it a biweekly show if not weekly. I bought *Blood on Black Wax* when it first came out because I collect horror/sci-fi soundtracks and I love re-reading it. More episodes, please!

@SPENCERELLIS2672, VIA YOUTUBE

RE: *ANDREA BREAKS HER BRAIN* *Answering Your Questions* on *Rue Morgue TV* – Somehow, I was allowed to see *T2: Judgment Day* in theatres when I was eleven. It was the most amazing and memorable cinematic experience of my life, ingrained in my DNA since that day.

@NICOLAS.VINCENT, VIA YOUTUBE

RE: *HORROR MUSIC ON LP,* *Soundtrack, and 7-Inch* on *Rue Morgue TV* – Great to see The Accused getting some attention. They are a horror band that all too often get overlooked.

@I-REN-ZERO, VIA YOUTUBE

RE: *THE PLAYGIRL KILLER* on *Rue Morgue TV* – This is by far my favourite so-bad-it's-good movie of that period. I have watched the DVD thirty-some times and saw it on TV in Los Angeles (KCOP Channel 13) at odd hours of the night in the 1970s. I always found a certain sadness about Bill Kerwin that works on screen. It's like, "how did I get stuck in this horrible movie?" again.

@SPICY80007, VIA YOUTUBE

TODAY I PICKED UP *RM#224* and read about the birthday effect...on my birthday! Hope I'll make it through the day...

MERRIN, NETHERLANDS, VIA EMAIL

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CORONER'S REPORT

WEIRD STATS & MORBID FACTS

ISSUE # 225

The first known special effect in film (the stop trick) appeared in the 1895 silent *The Execution of Mary Stuart*, where a woman's head is seemingly chopped off.

In a 2012 interview, *The Exorcist* actor Max von Sydow stated that his newfound belief in the afterlife came from famed director and former collaborator Ingmar Bergman contacting him from beyond the grave.

The original "Snow White" by the Brothers Grimm involves the Evil Queen intending to eat Snow White's organs (her lungs and liver, specifically) to gain immortality.

In 1667 New England, in an effort to reduce the blackbird population, a law was enacted that ordered all men to kill at least six birds before being allowed to marry.

Movie critic Gene Siskel hated the 1980 film *Friday the 13th* so much that he published star Betsy Palmer's hometown so people could send her hate mail.

In June 1876, James Moon, a blacksmith and Civil War veteran, killed himself with a homemade guillotine.

Since airing in 1972, Steven Spielberg's TV movie *Something Evil*, about a Pennsylvanian family's house being inhabited by demons, has never seen a domestic release in any format.

In 1945, a Wyandotte chicken named Mike survived for 18 months without a head due to an intact brain stem and a blood clot that prevented it from bleeding to death.

The 1931 Best Picture nominee *Trader Horn*, the first non-documentary filmed in Africa, had one crewmember eaten by a crocodile, another stomped by a rhinoceros, and its lead actress Edwina Booth contracted a career-ending illness.

Xyrophobia is described as the fear of razors.

It has become a tradition in British Antarctic research stations to watch John Carpenter's *The Thing* as part of their Midwinter feast and celebration held every June 21.

The budget of 1982's *Basket Case* was so low that the crew would go dumpster diving for discarded furniture and plumbing to dress the sets.

In 2011, a 30th anniversary edition of *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* was published with new artwork, but the original Stephen Gammell images were brought back for subsequent editions due to the furious uproar from readers.

COMPILED BY JAY CLARKE
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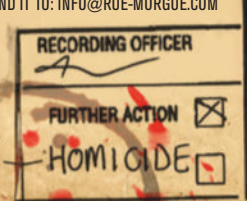
SEND IT TO: INFO@RUE-MORGUE.COM



EXPIRING MINDS...

ON RUE MORGUE'S SOCIAL MEDIA

What other Troma films should be remade and why?

If James Gunn came back for *Tromeo and Juliet*.
@ADAM.PLATYPUS, VIA INSTAGRAM

Rabid Grannies. They can have American actors read their lines in French.
LEE PASQUALI, VIA FACEBOOK

Honestly, *Terror Firmer* or *Troma's War*. I feel like with modern political landscapes, there's so much potential with those two IPs.
@GIVEMEBACKMYHORRORMOVIES, VIA INSTAGRAM

Remake them all if Lloyd Kaufman gets big paycheques. Otherwise no.
NICHOLAS MEARS, VIA FACEBOOK

None. Cultural stagnation needs to end.
@HUNTER_OF_LIGHT38, VIA INSTAGRAM

FINAL WORDS

AS CAPTIONED BY YOU ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA

"EAST LONDON'S ONE STAGE PERFORMANCE OF *DR. CALIGARI'S SOMNAMBULIST MEETS BABY JANE*."

THIS MONTH'S CAPTION CONTEST WINNER IS
TYLER FLETCHER, VIA FACEBOOK
Follow us on Facebook, Bluesky, and Instagram for a chance to have your Final Words!

THE ORPHAN WITH A SECRET

As regular readers know, we here at *Rue Morgue* scour the shadows to bring you tales of the real-life events behind our favourite horror movies and video games. However, the story of Natalia Grace may prove that the opposite also holds true; while there is no real-world alter ego for the psychotic Esther from 2009's *Orphan*, the tale of a dwarf who poses as a child to burn, shoot, and stab her way through adopted families may have planted an idea in the heads of Michael and Kristine Barnett, who claimed their adopted daughter was out to kill them.

Natalia was born in the Ukraine and diagnosed with a rare form of dwarfism called spondyloepiphyseal dysplasia congenita (SEDc). After spending her earliest years in an orphanage, she was eventually adopted by a New Hampshire family in 2008, relisted for adoption in 2010, and taken in by the Barnetts at the age of six. But then, in 2013, things took a turn for the bizarre when the adoptive parents suddenly petitioned a local court to have Natalia's legal age changed to 22, installed her alone in an apartment, and moved the rest of their family to Canada.

The Barnetts claimed that Natalia had pubic hair and was already menstruating, proving that she was much older than she was claimed to be. What's more, they asserted that their adopted daughter was a "sociopath" who frightened the couple on multiple occasions and threatened to stab and poison them and push Kristine into an electric fence.

After learning of Natalia's plight, another couple, Cynthia and Antwon Mans, took in the abandoned girl, but the religiously devout family was riddled with abuse. Natalia eventually found a stable home with Nicole and Vincent DePaul, a couple with dwarfism that noticed some odd behaviour from their newly adopted daughter – notably when she secretly recorded them in their home – but dismissed it as a symptom of reactive attachment disorder (RAD) from her time as an orphan.

A DNA test in 2023 did indeed put Natalia's true age at approximately 22 years old, meaning that she was likely around nine years old when the Barnetts adopted her and around twelve when they later abandoned her. The Barnetts were brought up on charges of neglect, but they were dropped and a gag order was imposed on the case, so nobody knows exactly what happened and how they were able to avoid accountability. However, Natalia herself acknowledged the cruelty of their claims by pointing out that their story was literally taken straight out of a horror movie.

With Hulu currently adapting Natalia Grace's ordeal in the 2025 limited series *Good American Family*, the absurdity of life imitating art only for art to imitate life would be funny… if it weren't so disconcerting.

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

Shauna Macdonald, "Sarah Carter" from *The Descent* (2005)

Sent to acting classes in her early teens to combat a speech impediment and severe shyness, Shauna Macdonald secured her first job at age sixteen, appearing alongside Billy Connolly in *The Debt Collector*. After drama school, she starred onstage as Catherine in *A View from the Bridge*, and landed a breakthrough role in the hit BBC drama *Spooks* the same year. Initially wary of auditioning for *The Descent* – fearful that "we'd all be sexy chicks with picks" – both the film and her intense central performance were critically acclaimed upon release in 2005. Since then, her onscreen work has gravitated towards thrillers and horror, a genre that "has been very kind to me over the last fifteen years." She won the Scottish BAFTA Award for Best Actress for *White Chamber* (2018) and is co-artistic director of Edinburgh Youth Theatre, which boasts James McAvoy as patron – a lifelong friend of Macdonald's from those formative drama classes.

LOUIS FLETCHER

NEEDFUL THINGS

1 SCARY MOVIE BINGO

$51 CAD

Spice up your watch parties with a round of Scary Movie bingo! Just mark off common horror tropes and clichés like “doofus cop,” “creepy phone call,” or “impractical footwear,” and you could scream your way to victory (ironic award ribbon included).

Uncommongoods.com

2 MACABRE CANDLE

$36 USD

From Mise En Scènt’s genre collection, this Macabre Candle is inspired by your long-burning flame for horror with notes of autumn air and spice. See also: the Summer Slasher, Bad Movie, and Villain Era candles for the full cinematic experience.

Miseenscent.com

3 *GREMLINS* SEATBELT BUCKLE DOG COLLAR

$26.90 USD

We all know that Gremlin care entails following the rules: keep away from water, don’t feed after midnight, and use this fashionable high-density polyester dog collar for the all-important walkies! Featuring vibrant Gizmo artwork and a secure seatbelt buckle closure, this is essential neckwear for your household gremlin.

Boxlunch.com

4 *PSYCHO* BUMPER STICKERS

$11 USD

Whether you drive like a psycho or just want to share your horror love with the maniac motorist behind you, these bumper stickers will deck out your heap in Hitchcock homage! Just steer clear of that pesky swamp out back.

Thecultofcult.com

5 WITCH’S BLOOD COFFEE

$29 USD

Black Craft’s deadly fusion of dark blends (coffee) with dark beats (bands) continues with this Witch’s Blood red velvet cake flavour in collaboration with LA-based rock outfit In This Moment. Available ground or whole bean, this bold roast will turn your morning routine into a dark ritual.

Blackcraftcoffee.com

1

2

MACABRE
MISE EN SCÈNT
HAND POURED IN BROOKLYN, NY
CANDLES INSPIRED BY YOUR FAVORITE FILMS
APPLE / CINNAMON LEAF / CEDARWOOD

3

4

5

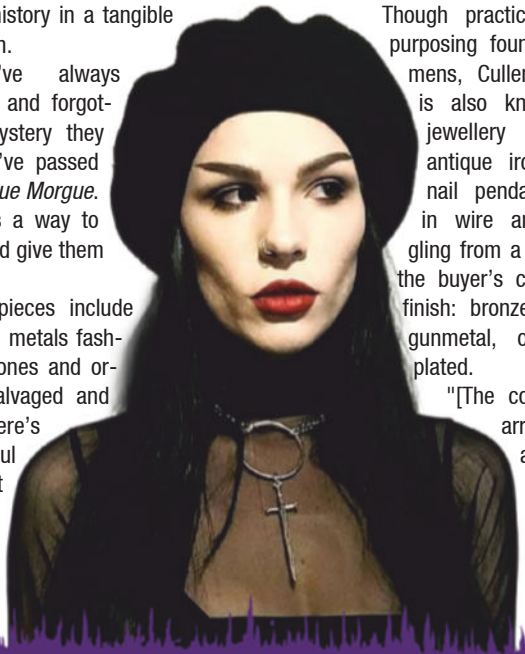
HANDMADE HORRORS

DARK AND DREARY ARTIFACTS BY KRISTINA CULLEN

We tend to see jewellery through the lens of adornment or function: a statement necklace designed to catch the eye, a diamond ring intended to signal status, or a sparkling bracelet chosen to add a bit of glitz to a well-loved garment. But for Washington-based artisan Kristina Cullen, who works primarily with found objects, bones, and artifacts, jewellery has the power to tell a story and carry history in a tangible form.

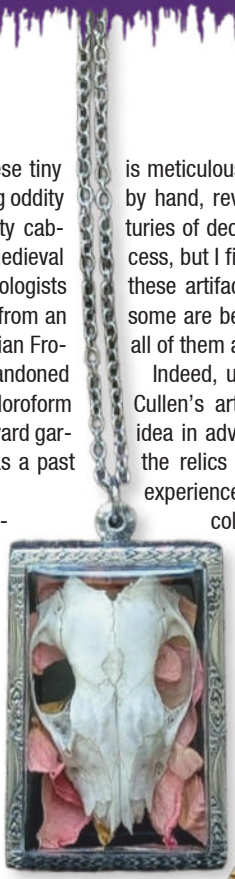
"I've always been drawn to lost and forgotten objects, the mystery they hold, the lives they've passed through," she tells *Rue Morgue*. "My shop began as a way to share these relics and give them new purpose."

Cullen's striking pieces include a variety of precious metals fashioned to highlight bones and organic matter, all salvaged and cruelty-free. ("There's something powerful in reclaiming what nature has left behind, in giving bones a second life," she says.) Many of these tiny treasures find their way into her striking oddity series. Inspired by large-scale curiosity cabinets, her collection now includes "medieval artifacts discovered by amateur archaeologists in the Balkans, hand-forged iron nails from an old blacksmith shop in Slovenia, Victorian Frozen Charlottes excavated from an abandoned German doll factory, antique glass chloroform bottle stoppers unearthed from a backyard garden in North Carolina – every item has a past life, a strange and fascinating origin."



Though practiced in repurposing found specimens, Cullen's shop is also known for jewellery featuring antique iron coffin nail pendants, set in wire and dangling from a chain in the buyer's choice of finish: bronze, black, gunmetal, or silver plated.

"[The coffin nails] arrive covered in rust and dirt, the markings of time," she explains. "Every nail is meticulously cleaned, sanded, and polished by hand, revealing their beauty beneath centuries of decay. It's a physically gruelling process, but I find it deeply satisfying to resurrect these artifacts. No two nails are the same – some are bent, some are pitted with age, but all of them are unique."



Indeed, uniqueness informs the entirety of Cullen's artistic output; rarely sketching an idea in advance, her inspiration comes from the relics themselves, and imagining what experiences they've had before joining her collection.

Despite their mysterious origins, each *objet d'art* holds unique power in Cullen's eyes.

"Strength in darkness has always drawn me in," she says. "Decay, ruin, and death hold a certain poetry. There is nothing more beautiful than something lost, something broken, something reclaimed."

JENN ADAMS

CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES

FRIGHT NIGHT ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK 7-INCH SINGLE

(Private I Records; Epic, 1985)

Written and directed by Tom (*Child's Play*) Holland, *Fright Night* was a hit with both fans and critics when it was released in August of 1985. Holland's directorial debut told of a teenaged horror fan, Charley Brewster (William Ragsdale), who learns that his charming next-door neighbour Jerry Dandrige (Chris Sarandon) is actually a vampire, and enlists the help of local TV horror host Peter Vincent (Roddy McDowall) to destroy him. Audiences enjoyed the film's humour, makeup effects, and score (with music by Brad Fiedel), which included the catchy title track, "Fright Night" by rock-pop group The J. Geils Band. Included on the film's soundtrack album, the song was also released as a 7-inch vinyl single on the Private I Records label in the U.S. and the Epic label in the Netherlands, with another of the film's tracks, "Boppin' Tonight," appearing on Side B. The front of the sleeve features the movie's iconic poster art, with credits printed on the back. Copies usually sell for around $20 each on eBay.

JAMES BURRELL

MORE CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES AT RUE-MORGUE.COM

BEFORE BECOMING A SHOCK ROCK SUPERSTAR, ALICE COOPER WAS A BAND RENOWNED FOR BLASTING TABOOS WITH ITS FUSION OF GLAM ROCK AND OVER-THE-TOP HORROR THEATRICS. NOW, AFTER FIVE LONG DECADES, THE ORIGINAL LINEUP REUNITES FOR A TRIUMPHANT RETURN...

THE REVENGE OF ALICE COOPER

BY AARON VON LUPTON

WHEN IT WAS ANNOUNCED THAT A NEW ALICE COOPER ALBUM, *THE REVENGE OF ALICE COOPER*, WAS DUE OUT THIS July, the question on everyone's mind was: is that guy still around? It's a bit of double entendre, given that the man named Alice Cooper (born Vincent Furnier) has reunited with the band members that originally gave him his moniker. For Cooper, life after death is second nature.

Originally formed by Furnier and high school friends Michael Bruce and Glen Buxton (R.I.P. 1997) on guitars, bassist Dennis Dunaway, and drummer Neal Smith, the band began as a directionless curiosity, going by the names The Spiders and The Nazz before landing on Alice Cooper. Under the new name they hit the big time, releasing a string of albums that have since become classics: *Love It to Death* (1971), *Killer* (1971), *School's Out* (1972), *Billion Dollar Babies* (1973), and to a lesser extent, *Muscle of Love* (1973). In those brief four years, Alice Cooper defined the term "shock rock" with a stage show that went beyond bright lights and pyrotechnics to include giant spiders, dead babies, towering Frankenstein monsters, executions, and beheadings – literally anything and everything that might outrage concerned parents with their unique glam rock-meets-Grand Guignol aesthetic.

"IT'S LIKE BEING ON A ROLLER COASTER. YOU KNOW IT'S GONNA SCARE YOU, BUT YOU KNOW IT'S ALSO GONNA BRING YOU HOME SAFE, AND IT'S THE SAME THING WITH A HORROR MOVIE"

– ALICE COOPER

Stage Fright: *The original Alice Cooper band, (clockwise from top) Neal Smith, Michael Bruce, Glen Buxton, Cooper, and Dennis Dunaway, released seven albums together before declaring an indefinite hiatus in 1974.*

The Alice Cooper band would release a total of seven albums together before taking an indefinite hiatus in 1974, leaving its singer to embark on a solo career under the same name, which kicked off with the hugely successful *Welcome to My Nightmare* (which inspired the title of my column in these very pages). In spite of Cooper's success as a horror rock god in the ensuing decades, the man behind the makeup battled excessive drinking and drug abuse along the way, causing him to very nearly lose his career, his family… and his life.

However, those days are long in the past and there's plenty to be celebrated about the original Alice Cooper band's rise from the dead. The creation of original members and famed producer Bob Ezrin (see sidebar, p.16), *The Revenge of Alice Cooper* bursts forth from the grave with an ominous opening bassline and creepy, whispered lyrics that hearken back to the menace of the band's earliest sounds. There are also punked-up biker tunes ("Wild Ones"), mental health nightmares ("Kill the Flies"), a spy movie theme-influenced murder tale ("One Night Stand"), and much more. The new album may be a little too slippery to pin down, but it is by far the best-sounding Alice Cooper band record to date, and with only a few nostalgic nods to the classics, *Revenge* is its own beast.

As for the band's septuagenarian singer, now 40 years sober, Cooper spends just as much time on the golf course as he does on the stage or in the recording studio, and maybe the occasional horror convention. The irony that he set out in the 1970s to be a rock 'n' roll villain in a world of rock 'n' roll heroes is that he is now widely regarded as one of the kindest and most articulate celebrities one could meet, in an industry ruled by clout, ego, and social capital.

Rue Morgue spoke to the original, reunited Alice Cooper band about its new album, and the challenges of bringing the scares after half a century apart.

After all this time, what led to this official reunion and album?

Alice Cooper: When we broke up, we didn't really divorce; we kinda separated. We became kinda dysfunctional after five albums in a row and no rest. We never stopped touring, and two of those were number one albums. It got to a point where I think we just needed to get away

from each other for a while. I just didn't really realize it would be 50 years. It felt like no time had gone by, because [*The Revenge of Alice Cooper*] ended up sounding like a 1975 album. We didn't try to sound like 1975, but we ended up sounding like 1975, and I thought that was really cool. It sounded to me like the album that should have come after *Billion Dollar Babies* [1973].

Neal Smith: It started when we played together at the Hall of Fame, then the odd show here and there. We kept our friendship alive. I am married to Dennis' sister, so I see him all the time. Michael lives in Arizona, so I come out here to see him. Unfortunately, we lost Glen, our lead guitarist in 1997. But we still write and trade songs.

It's funny you say that because the lead single, "Black Mamba," actually reminds me of something from* Welcome to My Nightmare, *the first Alice Cooper solo album from 1975.

Dennis Dunaway: It may be because that song came out of a jam, which isn't typically the straight-ahead approach that the original band took when writing.

NS: Also, the prominent bassline you hear at the beginning came out of writing "When Hell Comes Home," off *Welcome 2 My Nightmare* [2011], so there could be familiarity there. I think it's the most perfect song on the album and so the best one to lead off with.

Was* The Revenge of Alice Cooper *recorded together in the studio, or separately in different parts of the country?

NS: We have to be in the studio, that's where the chemistry is, that's the element that really cements everything. Sure, there are things that were added, you know, Michael had to add some more guitar. But we need to play it together in the studio because that's what leads us to playing it live, and that's what we do best. We were meant to play live.

The elephant in the room, of course, is that there was no Glen Buxton. What was it like doing this album without him?

NS: Michael and I were with him two weeks before he passed away in '97. We had done a show in Houston. When we left, five days later, I got the call from Janet, Glen's sister, that he had passed away the night before. I think it was a Sunday night. I was shocked. We were just with him.

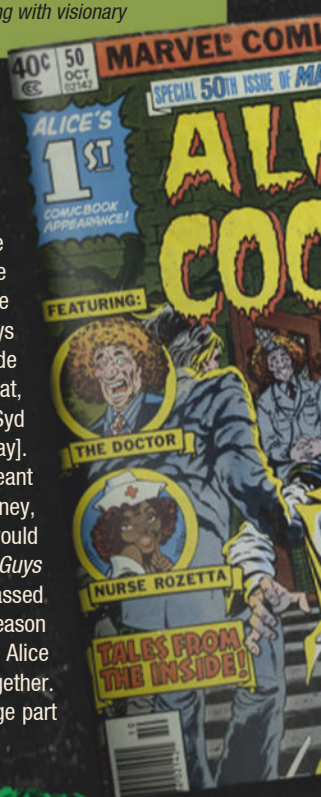
DD: He would always have a song that he wanted to play me over the phone, and it was always something that he would keep talking about and never quite get around to playing it for me. But when he got back from doing that gig with Neal and Michael in Texas, he was so excited about it. He called and it was about a two-hour phone call. That was the last time I talked to him. I had no idea that that would be the last time.

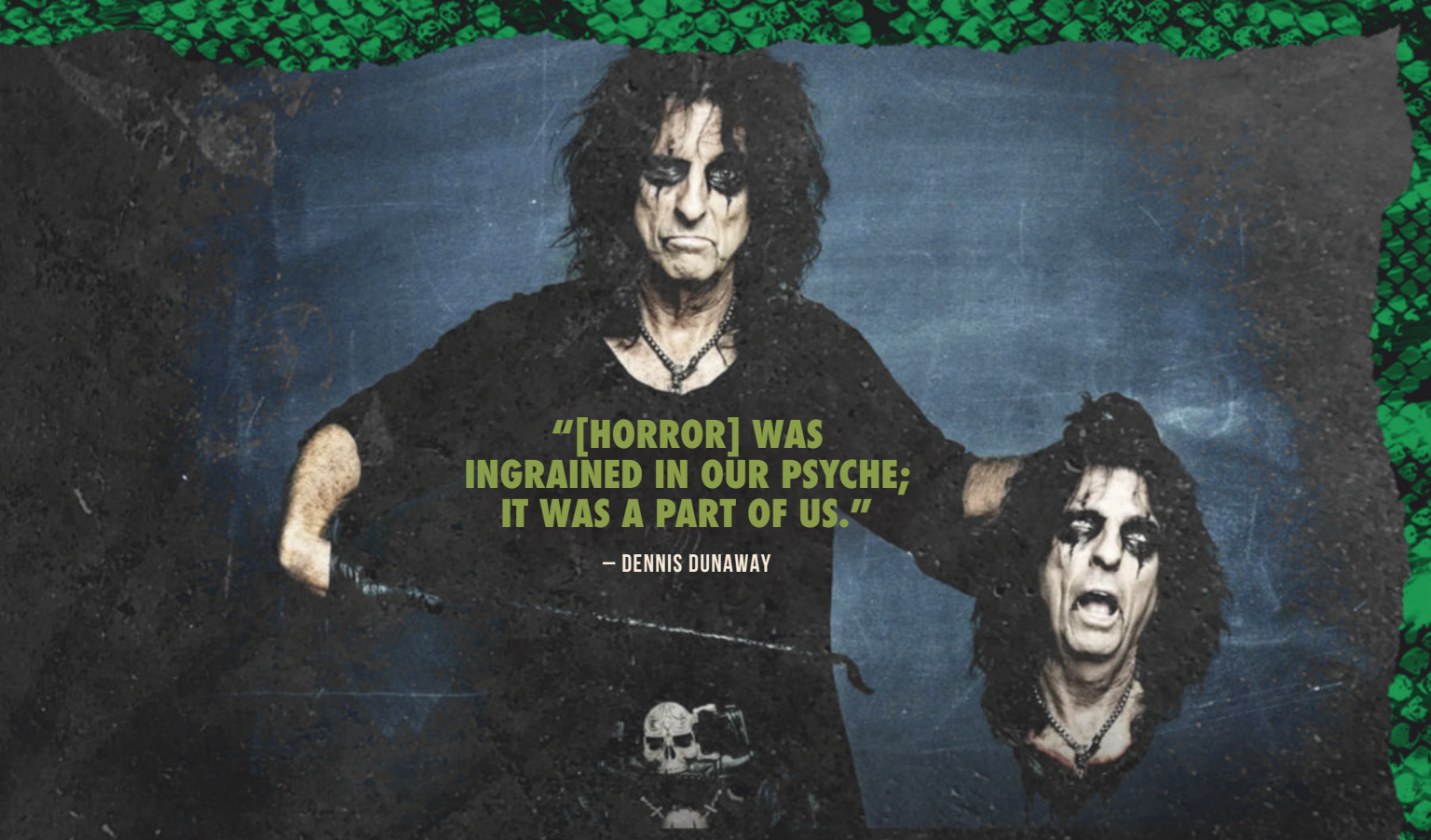
Sick Things: *The Alice Cooper band, now reunited after half a century apart, along with visionary producer Bob Ezrin (top), laid the foundation for Cooper's horror celebrity brand.*

Michael Bruce: One day we had lunch and we're all getting our food and in comes this plate with this huge sea bass and the first thing he does is plunge his fork into the eyeball, pull it out, and eat it. One of the musicians had to get up; he was gonna throw up. He left the table.

NS: Then on top of that, after the eyeball was out, he took his cigarette and put it right into the [socket]!

AC: Glen was our Keith Richards; he was everybody's favourite guy. We watched him disintegrate, which was very hard. It must have been like Pink Floyd watching Syd Barrett disintegrate. I mean, he was such a genius. Glen was always gonna come up with something that nobody else had ever played before because that's how he played. He just called it his own style. I don't know how to explain it and I guess that's a good thing; like, how do you explain Jeff Beck? We all had our own relationships with Glen. Of course, I was a drinker, and I drank with him. If he was in the '40s, he would have been one of the Bowery Boys. He was one of those guys that talked on the side of his mouth like that, you know? "What a Syd that guy is," [he'd say]. A "Syd," for him, meant anybody named Sydney, it was just a jerk. He would have been right out of *Guys and Dolls*. When he passed away, that was a big reason we couldn't put the Alice Cooper band back together. There was a huge, huge part missing!





"[HORROR] WAS INGRAINED IN OUR PSYCHE; IT WAS A PART OF US."

– DENNIS DUNAWAY

I guess that explains the song on the new album, "What a Syd."

AC: Yeah. We tried to capture Glen in certain ways. You couldn't capture him totally. But thank the Lord for Dennis Dunaway, who never throws anything away! Dennis has tapes of The Earwigs [early version of the band] rehearsing. So, he had tapes of Glen playing on demos and things like that, and we would just isolate that guitar solo and find a place where that would fit into a song, or even write a song around that isolated guitar part, so Glen could be on the album.

Looking back, what role did producer Bob Ezrin play in developing the band's horror image in those early days?

DD: Bob helped us get that kind of feel. In the early days we had "Fields of Regret," and we had "Lay Down and Die Goodbye," but by the time we met Bob we had become better songwriters. I had written "Black Juju," and Neal had done "Hallowed Be My Name," and Michael had done "Ballad of Dwight Fry." So, we were already becoming better songwriters to where we were able to write songs that would support this dark character that Alice was.

NS: Bob had a background in classical music, and once you add classical music to horror, then it really becomes emotional. It can be very frightening. And that was what Bob was able to do, take the element of what we were doing on stage and make it musical. Then we were able to come up with "Dead Babies," "I Love the Dead," "Killer" – all the songs that eventually really carved out what the image of Alice Cooper, the band, was.

AC: Bob and I always saw horror as a bit of comedy, you know? I couldn't think of too many horror movies that scared me, but I always loved the comedy involved in it. The fact that you would sit there and jump in your chair at something, and then that would make you laugh. It's like being on a roller coaster. You know it's gonna scare you, but you know it's also gonna bring you home safe, and it's the same thing with a horror movie. We'd watch *Frankenstein*, the original, and I'd go, "The monster is not really scary, it's Fritz [the Igor character] that's scary." And we'd see *Dracula* and go, "Dracula is not that scary. Renfield is scary." And so, we looked and we said, "Wait a minute. It's the same guy! How come nobody has ever talked about Dwight Frye? They talk about Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, [etc.]" And I'm going, "The scariest character deserves to have a song written about him just to expose him," and so we did. But we all let horror always be part of the writing.

Do you think today's generation understands why the Alice Cooper band was so shocking in its day?

DD: Today we have a lack of censorship, but back then the censors were all breathing down our necks. We would go right up to the line, because if you went too far across the line, you would end up not being in the record stores. It'd be an under-the-counter sale. So, we went right up to the line, then we stuck our toes across, and we kept pushing it little by little.

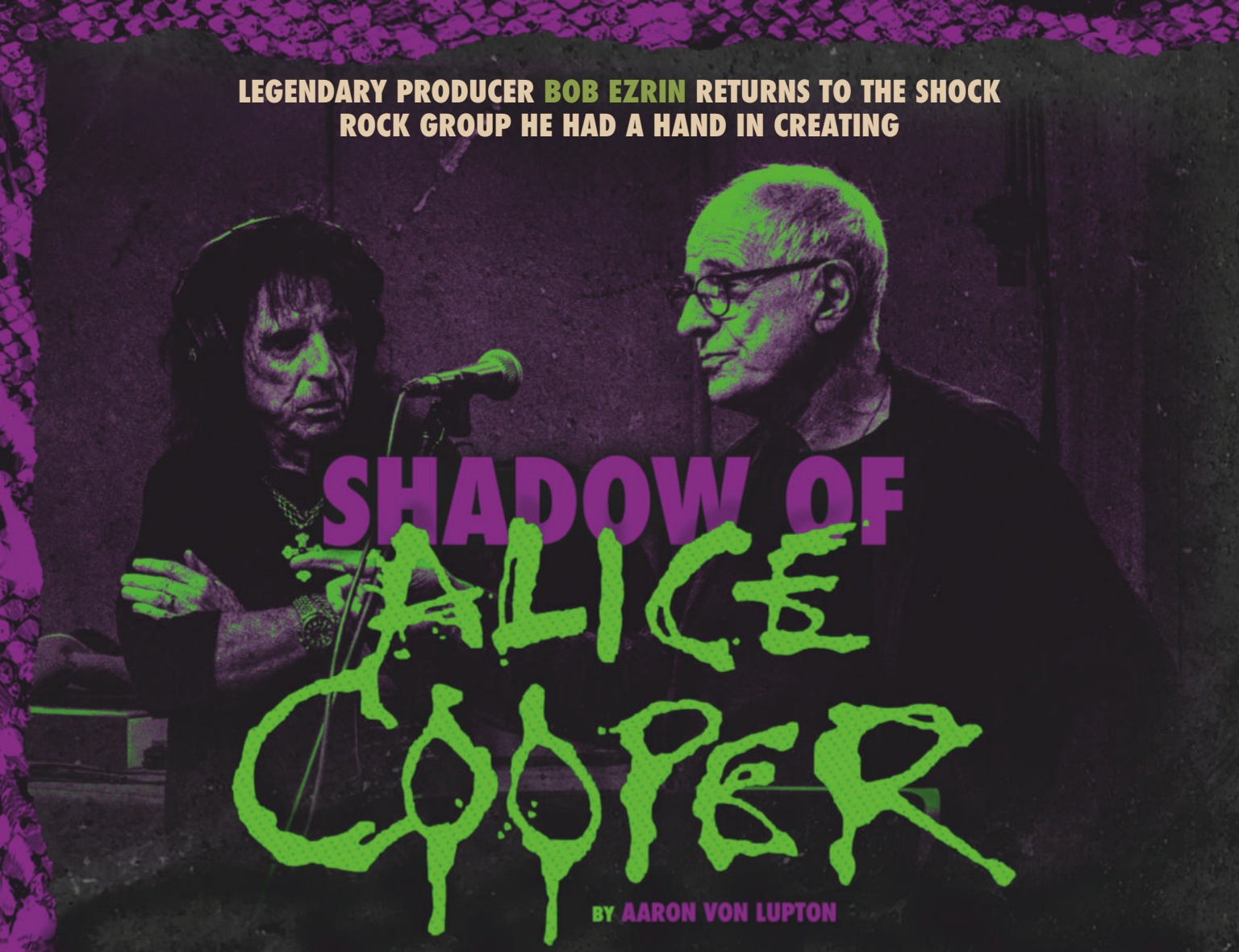
AC: We didn't mind [mixing] humour with horror, at the most inopportune times. Like this tragic "Dead Babies" [song]; there was a series of dead baby jokes when we were in school. "Dead Babies" wasn't about dead babies, it was about parental abuse. All that kind of stuff went into us, so it came out of us.

The necrophilia of "I Love the Dead" was pretty controversial for the time, wouldn't you say?

AC: If people aren't laughing at that, there is something wrong, especially "I Love the Dead." When we wrote that, I sat there with Bob and said I would really like to write something Edgar Allan Poe-ish and "I Love the Dead" was that. And it set up *Killer*.

Cont'd on p.18

LEGENDARY PRODUCER BOB EZRIN RETURNS TO THE SHOCK ROCK GROUP HE HAD A HAND IN CREATING



SHADOW OF ALICE COOPER

BY AARON VON LUPTON

Anyone who will ever peer into the annals of rock will find the name Bob Ezrin prominently etched there. The Toronto native produced Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, KISS' *Destroyer* (for which he co-wrote "Beth" with Peter Criss), the album *Strays* by Jane's Addiction, and made significant contributions to Nine Inch Nails' *The Fragile*, among many, many others. His chief endowment to classic rock, however, is arguably the music he produced and co-wrote for Alice Cooper, both in its formative years as a band, and later as a solo act.

Ezrin entered the fold of the original Alice Cooper band when he was hired to produce their first "serious" album, *Love It to Death*, in 1971 – but he did much more than that. Under his artful engineering and mixing of potions and poisons, he turned a bizarre curiosity into one of the world's biggest selling rock bands in lightning time. More importantly, he taught its members how to write songs, while also having the good business sense to amplify the horror theatrics they brought to the stage. Alice Cooper's original lineup – Cooper, Neil Smith, Dennis Dunaway, Michael Bruce, and Glen Buxton – became known the world over as shock rock pioneers but, without Bob Ezrin, there would have been no music to remember them by.

"IT WAS LIKE STEPPING INTO A HORROR MOVIE."

– PRODUCER BOB EZRIN, ON SEEING ALICE COOPER LIVE FOR THE FIRST TIME

In the beginning, Alice Cooper was a group of high school friends who had pursued their musical dreams long enough to release two albums – *Pretties for You* (1969) and *Easy Action* (1970) – which caught virtually no one's attention due to a lack of songwriting ability and anything resembling proper production values. Sensing they were dangerously close to irrelevance, Alice Cooper and manager Shep Gordon strategized the need for a top-notch producer to get them over the hump.

They approached producer Jack Richardson (The Guess Who), but he was so uninterested that he sent his underling, a young Bob Ezrin, to the studio lobby to get rid of them. Instead, Gordon persuaded Ezrin to attend a live show in Manhattan in the hopes of piquing his interest.

"It was at Max's Kansas City on September 8, 1970; a midnight show," recalls Ezrin. "I walked into the building with a friend, another Canadian guy, a CBC baby like me. We walked into this place, and it was like stepping into a Hieronymus Bosch painting. Everybody in the joint had spider eyes and spandex, black lipstick, black fingernail polish, jet black hair, and big high heels, and they kind of floated across the floor. They were wraith-like, white-skinned, and it was like stepping into a horror movie. And then the band comes on stage, and they are a fucking horror movie! They've got sets and props, and Alice has got a hammer in his hand and blood red gums. The whole thing was a horror experience, and I loved it."

Ezrin agreed to take on *Love It to Death*, which produced Alice Cooper's first hit single, "I'm Eighteen," originally written as an eight-minute jam and then distilled by Ezrin into a three-minute power anthem. Released at the

end of 1970, it was the band's first song on the charts and the one that convinced Warner Bros. that there was enough commercial potential for them to release an LP. *Love It to Death* also far expanded the band's conceptual prowess, nowhere more evident than on the track "Ballad of Dwight Fry," a dramatic, lunatic rock song based on the iconic American character actor of the Universal horror era.

STARRING ALICE COOPER MICHAEL BRUCE DENNIS DUNAWAY NEAL SMITH AND FEATURING A SPECIAL APPEARANCE BY GLEN BUXTON
THE REVENGE OF ALICE COOPER
DIRECTED BY BOB EZRIN
"The Return Album The World Was Afraid Of"

"All of us had a similar upbringing in the sense that Phoenix [where the band originally formed] and Toronto [Ezrin's hometown] were both a little bit isolated from the New Yorks, LAs, and Londons of the world," he explains. "However, we were united by television and radio. Most of the stations didn't have the budget to have a whole bunch of original programming so they played a lot of old movies and particularly horror movies and so we all grew up watching the Bela Lugosi pictures and Boris Karloff pictures, and so when the band said, 'Ballad of Dwight Fry,' I knew who Dwight Frye was, and loved it."

While the theatrical horror element sealed their new partnership, Ezrin was very conscious that his love of the genre extended to both movies and music, and both were equally important in this leaner, darker version of Alice Cooper. For example, it is now fairly common knowledge that when Cooper repeatedly cries "I gotta get outta here!" at the climax of "Dwight Fry," it's because Ezrin had placed folding chairs over the singer to induce a feeling of imprisonment. But there were other influences as well.

"I always loved to have theatrics in music, and it's not all from old black-and-white movies," he says. "It also comes from some of the music that I grew up with that I really love, like Tchaikovsky, or the Bach Mass in B minor or all this Wagner, big orchestral stuff. I loved it for its theatricality. It's like movie music, and I guess I was trying to extend that into the band."

Just as Cooper himself always said that no matter how shocking he tried to be, he always left the audience with cake and balloons (giant balloons in the case of closer "School's Out"), Ezrin maintains everything was done with a sense of humour. Even a song about having sex with dead people ("I Love the Dead") that was released on 1973's *Billion Dollar Babies* at the height of the band's success.

"We tried to make it shocking, and we tried to upset parents – it was part of our whole raison d'être!" he admits. "But in doing so, we laughed the whole time. I'm sure it must have been like that on the set of *Dracula*. That's how all of our sessions felt, like 'I can't believe we're doing this, but let's go for it.'"

Ezrin would come and go as producer throughout Cooper's career, taking his longest hiatus after the incredibly dark and uniquely horrifying *DaDa* (1983) and returning for the modern metal inspired *Brutal Planet* (2000) before finally recording with the original band again for several tracks on the sequel album *Welcome 2 My Nightmare* (2011). While those recordings were done separately with band members in different parts of the country, further collaborations continued, eventually culminating with the *Detroit Stories* album in 2021, featuring two songs performed by the original band. It also planted the seeds for a reunion album, *The Revenge of Alice Cooper*.

"[The original lineup] did Record Store Day together, performing live, and a whole bunch of stuff just started to happen," Ezrin recalls. "Then, by *Detroit Stories*, we actually were in the studio as a band, cutting songs. And it just became a natural extension of all of that to say, 'Well, what the hell? Let's do an album.'"

To mould a group of young musicians in their early twenties is one thing, but to pick up where you left off 52 years later is quite another, but for Ezrin it was like stepping back in time.

"Honestly, it was exactly the same as where we left it; just like hanging out with old friends," he says. "The most formative time of our lives is when we're teenagers and we're just becoming, right? Well, they were all becoming together at the same time, and you can't erase that. The only thing that may be stronger than that [bond] is a family bond, and sometimes that's not even true! Sometimes it's the kids that you were in a gang, or in a band, or on the team with."

"IT'S TOUGH TO DO ANYTHING THAT SHOCKING THESE DAYS. THE STUFF YOU'D HAVE TO DO NOW, YOU'D ALMOST HAVE TO BE ARRESTED TO DO IT."

– MICHAEL BRUCE

MB: I think it's kinda tough to do anything that shocking these days. I mean, I've thought about it. The stuff you'd have to do now, you'd almost have to be arrested to do it.

DD: We tried to get arrested, but we couldn't back then.

Are there any reunion shows planned for this album?

MB: I think that's a great idea and I think we're up for it; all it takes is a phone call. There's a lot of logistics that go along with it. We did [a show] in the UK because, you know, it's like the size of Texas. The United States as a whole is another can of worms where big cities are so far apart. But I'm as excited about the possibility of recording another album as I am anything else.

DD: How about a seven wonders of the world tour? We'll play the Great Pyramids and then Taj Mahal!

NS: That's a perfect example of what to expect when Dennis says, "Oh, I have a crazy idea!"

Love it to Death, Killer, School's Out, Billion Dollar Babies *and* Muscle of Love *all had a central theme. Does* The Revenge of Alice Cooper *have one?*

AC: I think it does, and a lot of our themes end up being invisible until we listen to it about ten times, and then go, "Oh, there it is, there's the snake that puts it all together." *School's Out*, *Billion Dollar Babies*, those were definitely intentional themes but *Love It to Death* was really just the first Alice Cooper album because *Pretties for You* (1969) and *Easy Action* (1970) were songs that we had

written when we were The Spiders or The Nazz. Then when we got with Ezrin, he was the one that gave us a signature sound. Like, why is it that when you hear The Doors, you know it's The Doors? It's because they have a signature [sound]. After I heard *Love It to Death*, I went, "Okay, that sounds like Alice Cooper." And that was when he gave us our sound. And I think that this album does that too.

DD: The theme wasn't intentional but about two thirds of the way through, it starts to get more and more Glen, and more and more back to the roots, and it becomes this full circle journey to me.

NS: Our cover of "I Ain't Done Wrong" by The Yardbirds goes all the way back to old bands I was in with Dennis as well as early incarnations of Alice Cooper, The Nazz, and The Spiders. So it's a great song and something I always love to play, plus "Return of the Spiders" from *Easy Action*, so there is a lot of nostalgia on it, but it's all fresh. There is a lot of horror in it as well. The title *Revenge of Alice Cooper* could be the title of a film like *Revenge of Frankenstein*. "One Night Stand" is like the plot of a slasher movie.

"THERE IS A LOT OF NOSTALGIA ON IT, BUT IT'S ALL FRESH. THERE IS A LOT OF HORROR IN IT AS WELL."

– NEAL SMITH

Was the love of horror always there, from the earliest days?

DD: All the way back in 1963, Alice and I would go to the drive-in and see *Tales of Terror* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Edgar Allan Poe movies, and *Psycho*, and things like that. And then the very first gig we actually did where we played more than one set was a 1964 Halloween dance at Cortez High School. We had spiderwebs, coffins, tombstones, etc. A ghoul would come out of the coffin and walk around, and we had a guillotine. All of us would predominantly watch horror movies when we lived together. It was ingrained in our psyche; it was a part of us. So, it was perfect for us to try to do a theatrical show that had dramatics, executions, the snake, and all of this stuff; it was like Halloween every day.

Can you remember the first onstage execution? It was by electric chair, wasn't it?

DD: Right. The best one happened in the garage at the Pontiac Farm [rehearsal space] because me and one of our roadies, Marty Friese, had just finished building the electric chair, and we got Alice to come out to take a look at it. We had blinking lights on it and everything. When we turned off the lights in the garage and flipped the switch, I told Alice, "Pretend you get executed." So, he set his beer down, and [his reaction] was so convincing that Marty and I thought we may have wired it wrong and really executed him!

Alice, you've been a horror fan forever; do you still go see every new horror movie?

AC: Yes! Have you seen *Sinners*? I really loved it. I was not expecting an Irish vampire, you know, clogging, but that made me sit there and go, "That was brilliant." I laughed so hard at *Final Destination* [*Bloodlines*]. My wife and I were laughing from the very opening; we were belly laughing because the deaths were so ridiculously profound. They went way out of their way on this one. I saw *Nosferatu*, and I went, "I like this because there's nothing like it…" but I didn't get it. I didn't quite get the storyline. Not only that, but I don't want my Nosferatu to have a mustache. The closest thing to real *Nosferatu* was the original *Salem's Lot*, which I think is still my favourite horror movie.

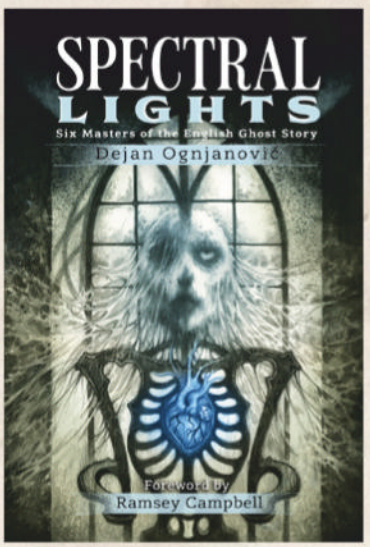
ON THE OCCASION OF HIS UPCOMING BOOK, *SPECTRAL LIGHTS*, *RUE MORGUE*'S DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ GIVES A SHORT MASTERCLASS ON THE MASTERS OF THE ENGLISH GHOST STORY

GHOSTLY GRANDMASTERS

BY DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

It has always been the ghost stories. The first ones that got me hooked on horror were the anecdotal "gramma's tales," literally told to me by my grandma, of the it-happened-to-so-and-so-from-my-village kind. You know the type: "Late one night, when the man was returning from his job in the city, he saw, at a particular crossroad, in the boughs of a big tree … a thing… watching him…" I was six or seven when I first heard them, and my whole life I kept searching for that special chill they gave me back then.

Serbian literature is sadly lacking in this type and genre, but I soon learned that the English had mastered precisely these kinds of stories, turning them into a veritable art form. They are also derived from anecdotes, folk beliefs, superstitions, more or less updated but essentially archetypal. And oddly enough, it's the archetype that gets you; the universal fairy-tale core beneath all the modern layers. The Evil Man back from the dead, as in M.R. James' "Count Magnus." The Sinister Invisible Presence in your room, as in Algernon Blackwood's "The Listener." The Creepy Church in the Mist in Vernon Lee's "Amour Dure."



It is this sort of story that I deal with in my first big fat American book, *Spectral Lights: Six Masters of the English Ghost Story*, coming this July from Chiroptera Press. I analyze works by some of my favourite authors – Blackwood, Lee, Montague Rhodes James, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Robert Aickman. Henry James' unavoidable masterwork *The Turn of the Screw* is also examined inside: after all, I'd already reimagined it in my second novel, *The Seducer* (only available in Serbian, where the title is more ambiguous). And, of course, I set it in my grandma's almost-deserted village in the hills.

Chiroptera is a small press devoted to the very best in classical horror, from special editions of Lovecraft to beautifully crafted books by living legends such as Thomas Ligotti and T.E.D. Klein. It was my afterword to Klein's *Dark Gods* (2024) which sold the company on the idea of offering me my book-length chance. Picking its topic was easy: the classical English ghost story, of course. I'd already edited selections of those in Serbia, so it was a reasonably easy task. Here's why…

Ghostly Graphics: *The limited hardcover edition of* ***Spectral Lights*** *features stunning black-and-white illustrations by Aleksandra Dević.*

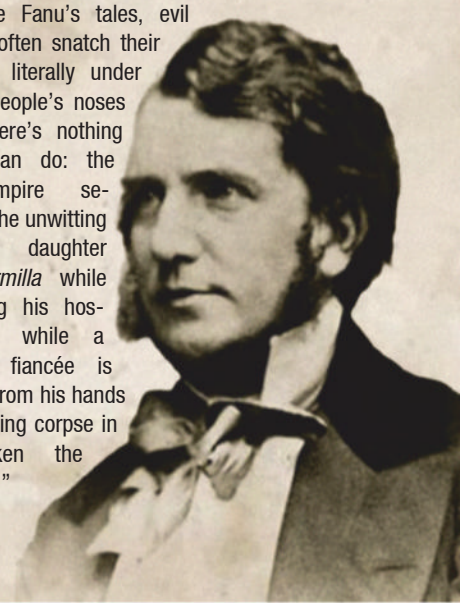
The notion of classical English ghost stories may invoke a cozy evening by the fire, preferably while the winds rattle the windows and gusts of rain lash them from the dark and cold outside; originally, they were meant to be read aloud during gatherings of friends and/or family, so there is a comforting aspect to them. But they were also vehicles for quite subversive ideas that at the time were unwelcome to be dealt with openly, so there is often a surprisingly disturbing aspect, too. Historically speaking, they discarded the gothic paraphernalia (the castles and counts and chain-rattling phantoms), and brought the spooks to a recognizable, contemporary environment, showing that they can be quite comfy in city apartments as well as in country houses.

The period in which this type of tale especially flourished was, roughly, between the mid-19th and mid-20th century; that's when the majority of the very best ghost stories were created, and these are the six masters which no overview of the form could afford to overlook.

SHERIDAN LE FANU (1814–1873) originated the classical ghost story and matured into one of its supreme authors. One is rarely a pioneer and the pinnacle, but Le Fanu was that kind of guy, at least according to M.R. James: "He stands absolutely in the first rank as a writer of ghost stories." Today he is best known for his supreme vampire novella *Carmilla* (1872), to which countless filmmakers were later indebted, from Roger Vadim to Jesús Franco and Jean Rollin. Yet, he was also instrumental in turning the ghost story into the dominant form which horror literature assumed during the second half of the 19th century. His imagination was equally nourished by the legends and folklore of his native Ireland and the concepts of esoteric Christianity of Emanuel Swedenborg; because of this, his ghosts are often more akin to demons and goblins than they are to the spirits of dead people, although he wrote of all kinds of entities with equal success.

"Madam Crowl's Ghost" practically created the mould for the traditional Victorian ghost story, introducing its central situation: the apparition of a deceased person reveals a part of the room where, in a secret hiding place, the solution to an old mystery is eventually discovered. In "The Familiar" a man is literally haunted by a "ghost from the past," i.e. a demonically resurrected shape of a man whom the protagonist drove to the grave. "The Dead Sexton" contains one of the scariest depictions of the "Devil comes to take his own" motif: not even a bunch of armed men on a nightly vigil will prevent the Prince of Darkness from grabbing the corpse owed to him.

In Le Fanu's tales, evil forces often snatch their victims literally under other people's noses and there's nothing they can do: the she-vampire seduces the unwitting baron's daughter in *Carmilla* while enjoying his hospitality, while a man's fiancée is stolen from his hands by a living corpse in "Schalken the Painter."

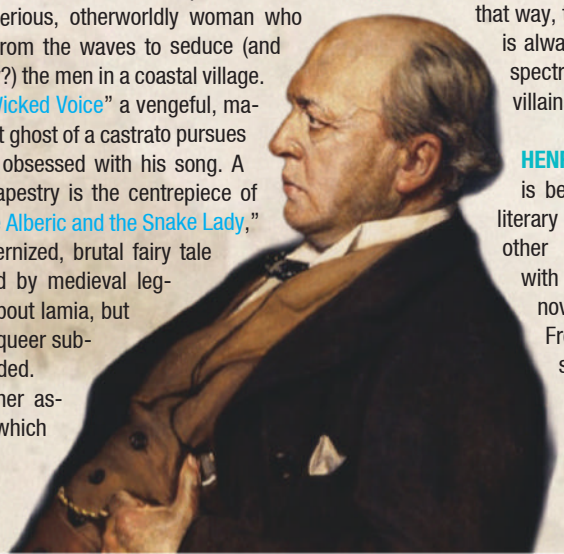


Le Fanu's best story is "Green Tea," a veritable "can't believe he made *that* scary" concept, dealing with a preacher haunted by – wait for it – a spectral monkey! No parody, no tongue in cheek there, but you'll have to read it to see how absurdity and irrationality are joined in utter mind-shattering madness. It also features Dr. Hesselius, a forerunner of a character type called a "psychic detective," that is, a psychiatrist who also happens to be a mystic, occultist, and mystery-solver – think Sherlock Holmes turned Van Helsing.

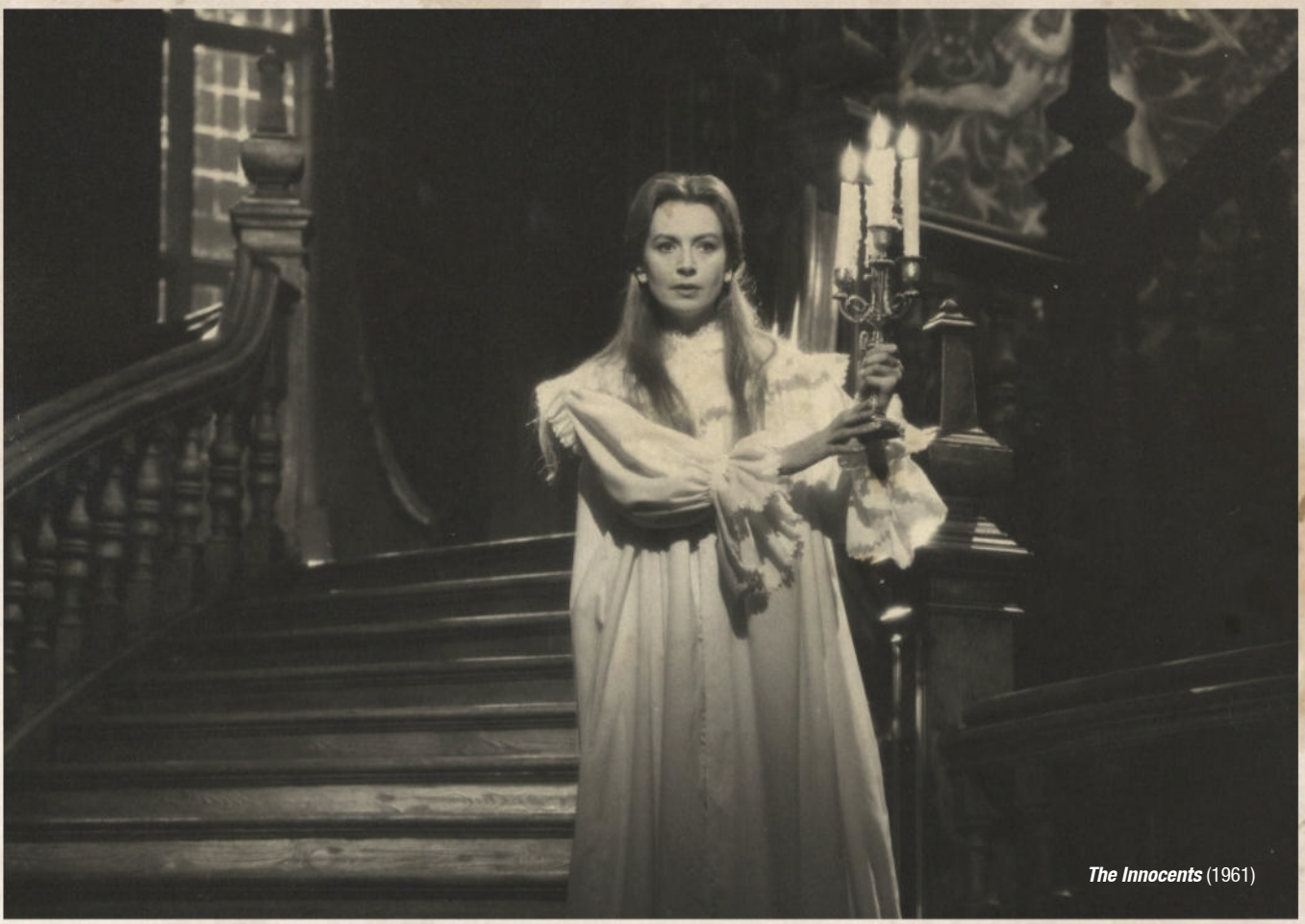
VERNON LEE (1856–1935) is probably the least known of the six authors covered in *Spectral Lights*, and that's a pity, because her art-themed ghost stories are the true masterpieces of this subgenre. Rich, nuanced, with minute portrayals of aberrant psychologies, doomed infatuations, and larger-than-life obsessions, from our 21st century's perspective they might be labelled "elevated horror." But with two distinctions: when they want to be scary, they are very; and also, they are not really "metaphors for grief." If anything, they are metaphors for the darkness of the human heart and, sometimes, for the "love that dares not speak its name." No wonder about the latter, considering her own same-sex proclivity.

"Her"? Ah, yes, "Vernon Lee" was born Violet Paget, but unlike many late Victorian female writers who were forced to hide behind male pseudonyms, she actually preferred the male name, male clothes, short haircut, and all. She was an aesthete who felt more comfortable studying the past, surrounded by works of art, rather than being among mortal men and women, and this was just fine, as it provided a perfect background for her stories about spooky works of art. *Oke of Okehurst - or, The Phantom Lover* is about a painter hired to do a portrait of a young woman who seemingly cheats on her husband with a long-dead lover. "Amour Dure" ("Love That Lasts") uncovers the truth behind the portrait of a medieval, much-maligned femme fatale, depicted as a mixture of Lucrezia Borgia and Erzsebet Bathory. "Dionea" deals with a sculptor who is unable to capture the beauty of a mysterious, otherworldly woman who came from the waves to seduce (and destroy?) the men in a coastal village. In "A Wicked Voice" a vengeful, malevolent ghost of a castrato pursues a man obsessed with his song. A huge tapestry is the centrepiece of "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady," a modernized, brutal fairy tale inspired by medieval legends about lamia, but with a queer subtext added.

Another aspect which makes Lee's stories modern is that they are never preachy: their morals are complicated by the ambivalent attitudes of their narrators and/or protagonists towards that which haunts them; they may participate in their doom, and prefer it that way, too. On the other hand, there is always a bit of sympathy for the spectres, who are shown as both villains and victims.



HENRY JAMES (1843–1916) is best known for causing more literary disputes than almost any other work of English literature with his quintessential ghost novella *The Turn of the Screw*. From students' papers to stuffy professors' academic collections, everyone and their grandma fights over



The Innocents (1961)

whether there were any ghosts, or was it all just in the governess's mind – and, in either case, what does it all mean? What were the true ambitions of this "pot-boiler," as James sometimes called it? The mystery at the heart of this work remains alluring, as evidenced by recent adaptations: *The Turning* (2020) was not great, not terrible, while the annoying *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020) was considered by many to have been "perfectly splendid." *The Innocents* (1961) it was most decidedly not.

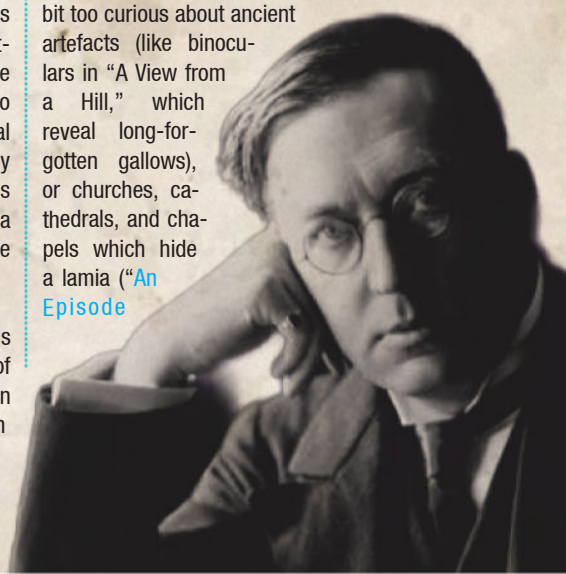
"[THE ENGLISH GHOST STORY] BROUGHT THE SPOOKS TO A RECOGNIZABLE, CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENT, SHOWING THAT THEY CAN BE QUITE COMFY IN THE CITY APARTMENTS AS WELL AS IN THE COUNTRY HOUSES."

So much has been written about this rightly revered classic, and so many adaptations and variations of its plot have been made, that it seems like everyone knows it inside out. If that were the case, it would've been futile to add yet another text to the mound of previous exegeses, but Ramsey Campbell, in his foreword to *Spectral Lights*, claims that "our commentator's scrutiny offers insights new to me," so perhaps it is possible to approach this work's mystery from a reasonably productive angle.

Whatever the case may be, it is often forgotten that *The Turn of the Screw* was not an isolated freak episode in our otherwise realist/modernist author's opus; he wrote about ten ghost stories before, and another ten after his most celebrated one, and one could do well to give a chance to "The Ghostly Rental," about an old man who collects rent from… yes, a ghost, and "The Real Right Thing" in which a dead author is unhappy with his young biographer's picking through his papers, or "The Jolly Corner" which depicts a man who chases, in his long-empty home, the ghost of his own "might have been."

MONTAGUE RHODES JAMES (1862–1936) is widely considered one of the greatest masters of the classic ghost story, if not *the* greatest. Even those who are not likely to read stuff written before Stephen King are probably familiar with his works through vintage British TV adaptations (now on DVD and Blu-ray) such as *Whistle and I'll Come to You* (1968), *A Warning to the Curious* (1972), *Lost Hearts* (1973), and others.

His stories are masterful short sharp shocks, imbued with his antiquarianism – he was a scholar devoted to Biblical and Medieval studies and a dean at Cambridge, writing these as a pastime and evening's entertainment to be read to his friends and colleagues. And, as fate would sometimes have it, it is on these unambitious (but not light) creations that his eternal fame will rest. His travellers and scholars are just a bit too curious about ancient artefacts (like binoculars in "A View from a Hill," which reveal long-forgotten gallows), or churches, cathedrals, and chapels which hide a lamia ("An Episode



LEGENDARY HORROR FICTION WRITER RAMSEY CAMPBELL EXPLAINS WHY MORE READERS SHOULD SEEK OUT THE CLASSIC GHOST STORIES OF ENGLAND'S PAST

GHOSTLY REFLECTIONS

BY DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

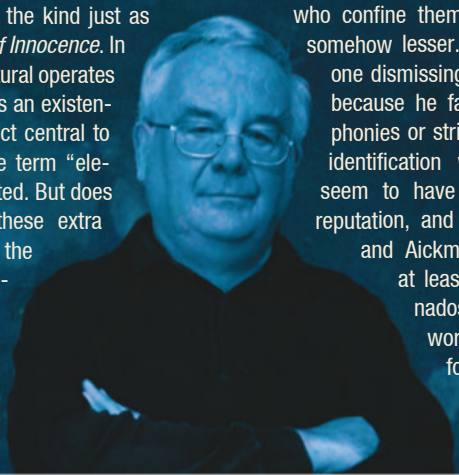
One could hardly find a better person to write a knowledgeable foreword to *Spectral Lights* than Ramsey Campbell, the superlative heir to what was best in the classical English ghost story tradition and who has provided it with a modern slant. Campbell is also a thoughtful connoisseur of the genre, as evidenced by the dozens of anthologies he edited and by his ruminations on all things horror over many years and many works. In this exclusive for *Rue Morgue*, Campbell further elucidates on a few matters he touched upon in the book's introduction.

What is it about the ghost story that attracted almost all canonical non-genre authors, from Charles Dickens to Joseph Conrad and Henry James?

Ramsey Campbell: Because it sends their imagination into territories mere realism can't reach, and their contributions demonstrate the considerable range of topics it lets them address. Perhaps it relates to Robert Aickman's formulation that we need to believe in a place elsewhere. Many writers of short stories for adults (and some for children) have been compelled to confront the supernatural. A few of the most notable: Rudyard Kipling ("The Mark of the Beast," "They"), E.M. Forster ("The Story of a Panic"), and Graham Greene ("The End of the Party," "A Little Place off the Edgware Road"). Novelists such as Penelope Fitzgerald and Edmund Crispin have embedded ghostly tales in novels that weren't spectral in themselves. Perhaps in addition this proves how the gothic remains vital. After all, Dickens brought this structural tendency into the mainstream.

If the first reading brings chills, surprise, shock… why do we keep coming back to them, even after we know what happens in the end?

RC: Many classic ghostly tales function as historical snapshots. Some of E.F. Benson's spook stories reveal social mores and conventions of the period, much as his *Mapp* and *Lucia* social comedies do, and Edith Wharton's ghost stories equally offer insights of the kind just as much as, say, *The Age of Innocence*. In many tales, the supernatural operates as a metaphor as well as an existential experience, an aspect central to the field long before the term "elevated horror" was invented. But does the field really need these extra justifications? I believe the engagement of the imagination is enough – the lifting of it to the level of the supernatural. I'd say that's what elevated horror ought to mean.



Why do you think authors like Vernon Lee and Robert Aickman are still insufficiently known among genre audiences and why haven't they become part of mainstream English literature?

RC: It's surely both unfortunate and unfair that they aren't more widely celebrated, not least since they both wrote in an era where a significant number of authors – W.W. Jacobs, L.P. Hartley, Elizabeth Bowen, for example – included supernatural tales in their mainstream collections without setting them apart in any way (although admittedly Aickman came in at the end of that era). Perhaps it's the curse of specialism, the nonsensical reductive notion that writers who confine themselves to a genre are somehow lesser. Can we imagine anyone dismissing Chopin's achievement because he failed to compose symphonies or string quartets? That said, identification with a genre doesn't seem to have harmed M.R. James' reputation, and so the neglect of Lee and Aickman remains enigmatic, at least for me. As for aficionados, I can only think the works seem too demanding for too many of them.

Algernon Blackwood

of Cathedral History"), or the undead "Count Magnus" with his tentacled companion, or clues leading to "The Treasure of Abbot Thomas" and its frightful guardian…

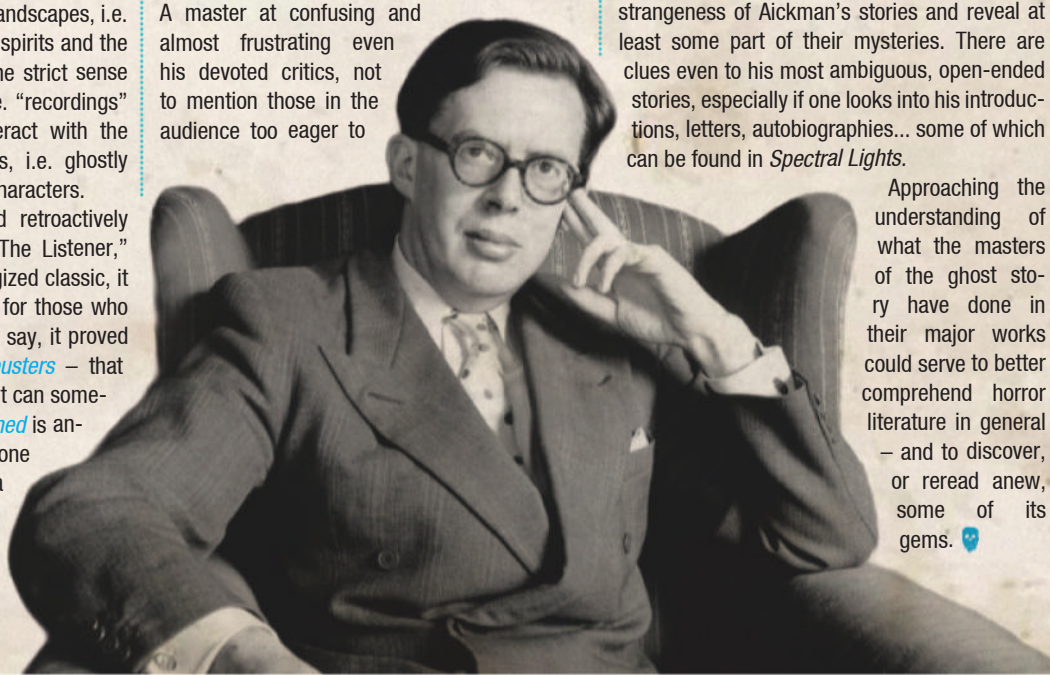
Again, one cannot dispute judgement from Campbell that "James can convey more spectral terror in a single glancing phrase than most authors manage in a paragraph or a book." And besides that, he was also a worthy theoretician of these stories' content and craft, succinctly defining the hows and whys of the horrific ghost story. Coming from someone who most decidedly knew what he was talking about, those maxims are well worth studying even in this day and age.

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD (1869–1951) is best known for his two cosmic horror masterpieces, "Willows" and "Wendigo," but his rich opus is much more varied, and contains some significant additions to the ghostly lore. All of Blackwood's supernatural writings could be roughly divided into two groups: haunted houses, i.e. ghost stories set in the midst of civilization, or on its border with nature; and haunted landscapes, i.e. stories set in nature imbued with spirits and the numinous. His ghost stories in the strict sense depict both passive hauntings, i.e. "recordings" of past events that do not interact with the characters, and active hauntings, i.e. ghostly influences that interact with the characters.

One of the most sinister and retroactively gruesome ones is featured in "The Listener," but although it's a much-anthologized classic, it would be a pity to spoil its twist for those who have yet to discover it. Suffice to say, it proved – many decades before *Ghostbusters* – that ghosts are not always ethereal but can sometimes get pretty yucky. *The Damned* is another classic novella dealing with one of the author's common themes: a place possessed by the poisonous, posthumous pressure of someone else's dark thoughts and evil deeds' residue (also treated in "Secret Worship," "The Occupant of the Room," and others).

Algernon Blackwood has put a significant stamp on the ghost story tradition thanks to several qualities: his belief in the supernatural was moderated by his intelligence and his direct personal experiences in "haunted house" investigations; also, he could write clear, direct prose which is effectively scary when it needs to be. Finally, the worldview and ideas behind his best writings elevate them from mere entertainment to the level of valid and valuable artistic expression.

ROBERT AICKMAN (1914–1981) was called by yours truly, in *RM#148*, "easily the greatest writer of terror tales whom you have never read – or even heard of." In the decade after this claim things may have changed for the better, thanks to the accessible Faber editions of his long-ghettoized, hard-to-find special editions, but Aickman was never destined for mass popularity. A master at confusing and almost frustrating even his devoted critics, not to mention those in the audience too eager to have their mysteries spelled out by the end of the tale, he will forever be an acquired taste. But what a unique taste it is!



Think of "The Hospice," portrayed as a purgatory in the midst of the contemporary spiritual vacuum, where one of the characters admits: "Most of us here are lost." There are few ordinary spooks in Aickman's stories, but there *is* plenty of spookiness of the kind suggested by the line from "Meeting Mr. Millar": "I believe mine to be the narrative of a haunted man rather than of a haunted house." His characters roam the uncharted territories: sometimes those are deep Swedish woods for the hiking insomniacs ("Into the Wood"), or more commonly the seemingly innocuous English ones ("The Next Glade"), or moors ("The Stains"). But sometimes they are urban labyrinths ("Never Visit Venice") or decrepit coastal towns overcome by the resurrected, as in "Ringing the Changes," one of the scariest horror stories ever written.

One should not give up and despair, like many critics have: there are ways to approach the strangeness of Aickman's stories and reveal at least some part of their mysteries. There are clues even to his most ambiguous, open-ended stories, especially if one looks into his introductions, letters, autobiographies... some of which can be found in *Spectral Lights.*

Approaching the understanding of what the masters of the ghost story have done in their major works could serve to better comprehend horror literature in general – and to discover, or reread anew, some of its gems.

LEGENDARY PICTURES, CREATORS OF A BIG-BUDGET MONSTERVERSE POPULATED BY A TRIO OF *GODZILLA* FILMS AND THE *JURASSIC WORLD* FRANCHISE, FLEXES ITS MIGHTY MUSCLE TO REBOOT A 40-YEAR-OLD SUPERHERO BLACK COMEDY SPLATTERFEST

TOXIE'S TRIUMPH

BY JOHN W. BOWEN

When *Rue Morgue* spoke to Troma founder Lloyd Kaufman about the daunting prospect of handing his bizarre and beloved Toxie over to another filmmaker, his relief was as palpable as his enthusiasm.

"There were some very good people [attached] along the way," he says of various near-misses in the *Toxic Avenger* reboot sweepstakes, "but you know, we couldn't just give it away – we had to wait for the finest!"

The finest, in this case, turned out to be writer/director/actor Macon Blair and a cast that boasts *Game of Thrones*' breakout star Peter Dinklage as the titular hero and bona fide Hollywood icons Elijah Wood and Kevin Bacon in supporting (read: villain) roles. Blair's recent on-camera work in popular indie cinema (Jeremy Saulnier's dark action thrillers *Blue Ruin* and *Green Room*) and mainstream fare (*Oppenheimer* and TV's *Law & Order: SVU*) has brought him attention as an actor, but it was his first turn as writer/director of the superb, bleakly comic neo-noir *I Don't Feel At Home in This World Anymore* that raised his profile as a filmmaker – particularly upon said film's scoring a jury prize at the Sundance Film Festival.

"That award kind of put a little spotlight on it and I'm delighted that Netflix [picked it up for streaming]," the affable Virginia native says. "I do feel like it opened some doors for me; it certainly opened the door for me at Legendary Pictures."

Indeed, Legendary soon contracted Blair's services for a spat of secondary writing on some of the *Godzilla* movies among other scripts that ultimately served as a calling card for executives within the company. The relationship would eventually pay further dividends when Legendary executive Alex Garcia, a long-time Troma fan himself, snapped up the rights to *The Toxic Avenger*, which suddenly came available after making the rounds for several years.

"IF WE'RE GOING TO CALL IT THE TOXIC AVENGER, WE SHOULD PRESERVE THE VIBE TROMA STARTED OUT WITH."

– DIRECTOR MACON BLAIR

Self-Made Monster: *From Toxie's humble beginnings as an indie micro-budget darling comes a star-studded Hollywood remake, populated by A-listers Elijah Wood, Kevin Bacon (bottom), and Peter Dinklage as pre-toxic Winston.*

"Alex was approaching it not just from a studio 'Let's get a piece' [mentality], he was also approaching it as someone who really did grow up on those movies, who really was a fan of Troma in general and *Toxie* specifically. So, he was kind of the driving force in getting this movie off the ground."

Like Garcia, Blair had a childhood attachment of his own to the wild world of Troma, having first imbibed of Kaufman's toxic cauldron sometime in the sixth grade. The original *Toxic Avenger* and *Class of Nuke 'Em High* proved instructional for Blair and friends as they availed themselves of a video camera and began making their own movies.

"The Troma films and Monty Python, specifically, were the two things that we just really shamelessly ripped off/were influenced by as we started to figure out how to make our own movies," he says. "So that's what imprinted on me: that sensibility, that tone, the sense of humour of those films. What we were making started to resemble much lower-budget versions of those early Troma movies. As I got older, I was still fond of them but it's not like I had this lifelong mission to remake one of them on my own; that was a strange confluence of events."

A significant portion of said confluence involved Legendary acquiring the rights to *The Toxic Avenger* after it had bounced around between studios and independents, often generating interest without ever finding a home. Not that there weren't some close calls.

"I don't know all the particulars," Blair says, "but I do know just from following it in the trades that there was a [proposed] PG-13 version with Arnold Schwarzenegger attached. I believe Steve Pink [*Grosse Pointe Blank*, *High Fidelity*] did a draft of that – that was one version that was going around. I don't know where it was set up but that was at least one version."

Eventually, the aforementioned Garcia brought it to Legendary and put out a call to writers, directors, and producers for pitches.

"At first I was hesitant," Blair admits, "but then I thought this was actually the type of movie I wanted to do – not necessarily a Troma movie but something that was very broadly comedic with some gore and creatures and kind of a sweetness to it. It was more a tone I'd been wanting to do. And when they suggested *The Toxic Avenger* I thought, 'Oh my gosh, this would really support that kind of tone.' And the fact that it was so influential on me as a kid caused it all to make sense in my head and that's why I pounced on that opportunity."

Of course, a major selling point would be the mighty Dinklage, who entered the picture in an unexpected but fortuitous way. As luck would have it, when Blair's *I Don't Feel at Home* won that jury prize at Sundance, Dinklage was on the jury. The two met and struck up a friendship where they exchanged scripts and discussed projects to potentially work on together. But then *The Toxic Avenger* dropped on his lap, and the thought crossed Blair's mind of having Dinklage solidify the audience's connection with Toxie, before he mutates and disappears into the makeup.

"I thought Peter would be great at that because he's charismatic and he's funny but also has a kind of serious dramatic side to him – all these things going on at once," says Blair. "And I thought, if we only have a handful of scenes with him [before the transformation], then we could really get people on this character's side before he becomes this mutant."

The most significant departure from Toxie's original storyline isn't just our hero's height, it's the type of journey he's on, although the theme of a lifelong underdog battling powerful, corrupt forces remains intact. Blair is adamant about not wanting to retell the original *Toxic Avenger*'s Melvin Ferd story, which was very much about a teenage guy trying to get laid. Instead, he renamed Melvin as Winston and recast him as a father.

"The emotional part of the story isn't about him trying to get a date, it's him trying to reconnect with his stepson," says Blair. "So, it's familiar and similar to the original but it's a new character with a new journey to go on. People will feel we're doing something fresh with it but it's not like 'Alright, we're gonna do *The Dark Knight*.' We're still keeping Toxie lighthearted and fun and goofy, the way people expect it to be. If we're going to call it *The Toxic Avenger*, we should preserve the vibe Troma started out with. These movies have a very passionate fanbase and if we're not making sure that they feel like we're preserving this character they've loved for so long, then what's the point?"

And what more ardent fan could there be than Kaufman himself? He's sufficiently content with the result to mangle a line from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*:

"Hey, we are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with sleep as we are sliding down the razor blade of life, so what a lovely thing to happen! Can't you tell how happy I am?"

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FEAR IS REAL

BY ROCCO T. THOMPSON

For those seeking their tingles on the smuttier side of genre fiction, author Chuck Tingle has emerged as an icon of outsider lit; the viral eroticist, pop philosopher, and joyful punk-provocateur-turned-horror-writer made a pseudonym for himself with his queer horror erotica (dubbed the "Tingleverse") that quickly amassed him a legion of devoted fans (referred to by the author as "buckaroos" and "ladybucks").

And while his recent foray into mainstream horror fiction may be more accessible to populist sensibilities, there's no question that Tingle's output retains its edge: his latest apocalyptic brain-melter, *Lucky Day* (out August 12 from Tor Nightfire), is all about staring oblivion right in its ugly mug and having the bravery to laugh.

"It's the most fun you'll ever have wrestling with the profound weight of existential dread," Tingle tells *Rue Morgue*. "People often say, 'If nothing matters, there's no reason to try.' *Lucky Day* proposes a different take: if nothing matters, you might as well go for it!"

Readers have responded positively to his gradual mutation from self-publishing short-form smut-peddler to bestselling author, two-time Hugo Award finalist, Bram Stoker Award nominee, Goodreads Award nominee, Golden Poppy Award finalist, and Audie Award winner.

Tingle's queer-affirming magical realist romances (the author refers to them as experimental or post-Dada erotica) established a bizarre, interconnected world, rife with carnal dalliances with cryptids (e.g. *Pounded by President Bigfoot*), dinosaurs (e.g. *Space Raptor Butt Invasion*), mythological beasts (e.g. *The Unicorn Them Fatale Pounds My Non-Binary Butt Mysteriously*), sentient objects (e.g. *Slammed by My Handsome Fidget Spinner*), assorted foods (e.g. *The Sentient Bread I Just Baked is a Lesbian and She Eats My Ass*), and even abstract ideas (e.g. *Slammed in the Butthole By My Concept of Linear Time*), but always with tongue firmly in cheek. In addition to his increasingly metafictional, rib-ticklingly prolix titles (e.g. *Almost Pounded By the Physical Manifestation of Simulation Theory After Realizing We're Erotica Characters Then Deciding to Just be Friends*), the hammy, stock-image-heavy covers have become as recognizable to his oeuvre as the stories themselves.

Having achieved the sort of online notoriety most pop-provocateurs can only dream of, Tingle then decided to return to his first love: horror. The author used his self-published novella, *Straight*, as a proof-of-concept to see if his buckeroos would bite. Concerning a cosmic event that, one

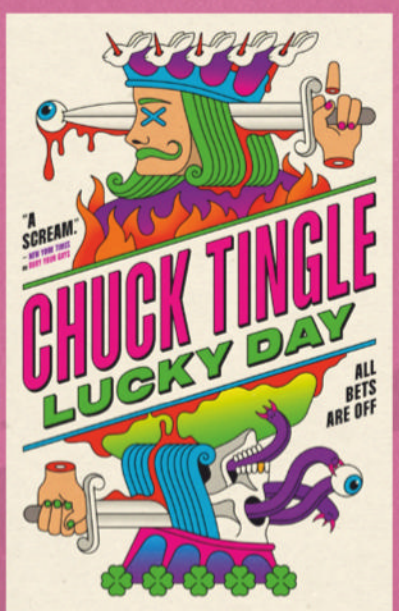
night a year, turns cisgender heterosexual people into bloodthirsty rage zombies, fan response to the book was overwhelmingly positive. Even so, Tingle's subsequent transition to traditional publishing was anything but traditional.

> "NOTHINGNESS IS SO MUCH SCARIER THAN ANY TANGIBLE MONSTER."
>
> — CHUCK TINGLE

"I went on Twitter, and I tweeted, 'I would like a traditional publishing deal. I have written a horror novel. Who would like to give me one?'" he recalls with a snort. "And then [Tor Nightfire] replied, 'We are interested.' So, it is a very unique story in that you hear a lot of authors [describe] querying, getting your agent. It's a long road for many authors. The longer answer is that I built up a very large fan base by writing my erotica for so long, so that I could tweet that and then get that. The funny, short answer is that I tweeted, 'I would like a book deal,' and then I got [one]."

Tingle's first book for Tor Nightfire, 2023's *Camp Damascus*, took aim at American Evangelicalism in a gay conversion camp with a demon possession-bolstered one-hundred-percent effectiveness rate. It was followed in 2024 by the Hollywood-set *Bury Your Gays*.

His latest for the imprint, *Lucky Day*, concerns Vera Norrie, a bisexual statistician who finds her world of probabilities upended when she's one of the sole survivors of a cataclysmic disaster known as the Low Probability Event, wherein nearly eight-million freak deaths occur simultaneously across the globe in a flurry of mid-air plane crashes, mass hangings via parade balloon tether, parasol lobotomies, and chimpanzee typewriter bludgeoning (in case you forgot this was a Chuck Tingle joint). Years later, a suicidally depressed Vera is thrust back into the realm of ratios and odds when she receives a visit from Agent Jonah Layne of the Low Probability Event Commission, an extrajudicial government agency on a mission to uncover the truth of the violent incident that irrevocably altered the world. Tasked with helping him investigate a supernaturally lucky Las Vegas casino that may be tearing holes in the fabric of reality, Vera is challenged to rediscover meaning in the vast, crushing senselessness of human existence.



"*Lucky Day* is about a world where all the most absurd, horrible things that can happen, do happen," explains Tingle. "But underneath all that, it's a riff on the feelings that gatekeeping can bring out of marginalized people when they're actively erased. Bisexual people are told they don't exist all the time, but that's ridiculous. So, I thought, 'What if I wrote a novel about a bisexual person going head-to-head with non-existence?'"

All this talk of non-existence and erasure is especially interesting when you're speaking to someone through a pink sack mask and sunglasses. Tingle's true identity is a closely guarded secret: so close, in fact, that not even the author's editor, agent, or lawyer is privy to it. But for the author, the mask is more than a gimmick.

"I think it was Oscar Wilde that said, 'If you want a man to tell you the truth, give him a mask,'" he muses. "So, I started presenting myself in a very layered way, with a lot of metaphors about my life. What I realized was the more that I stripped away those metaphors and the more revealing I could be, the healthier it was for me as far as this expression of myself. I am at a point now where I've really tried to strip away all of the layers that I can as far as keeping myself anonymous."

Lucky Day may be Tingle's most timely work yet, reflecting our sense of doomsday detachment in a global epoch where it feels like every day we're forced to carry on in the face of some new, potentially world-ending absurdity, with every word on every page in every chapter reflecting the terror of the now. But amid the chaos, the book rings with the author's abiding ethos in the words that appear scrawled across his sack mask: Love is Real.

"Nothingness is so much scarier than any tangible monster," he philosophizes. "All we're trying to do, and all any dang possum in your backyard is trying to do, is fill this space with *something*.

"Love *is* real," he concludes. "That's the surface message: take that home with you, meditate on it, and then everything else, just go nuts."

CINEMACABRE

FILM + DVD + REISSUES

DEVILISH CHARM

WITCHBOARD

Starring Madison Iseman, Aaron Dominguez and Jamie Campbell Bower
Directed by Chuck Russell
Written by Chuck Russell and Kevin Tenney
A-Nation Media

After Hasbro bought the rights to the Ouija board in 1991 and launched its own film series based on the parlour game in 2014, it seemed like the *Witchboard* films from the '80s were as dusty as your mom's attic. Now, co-writer/director Chuck Russell (the maestro behind such visual cinematic feasts as *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors*, *The Mask* with Jim Carrey, and *The Blob* remake), revives the three-film franchise with pizzazz.

Russell's new take is more of a reboot, detailing the sinister origin of an ancient pendulum-style board that belonged to a nasty, bishop-fighting witch back in the days of yore. In modern-day New Orleans, the board is stolen from a museum in a heist gone wrong and winds up in the hands of Emily (Madison Iseman) and her fiancé Christian (Aaron Dominguez) as they embark on opening their own restaurant. Predictably, Emily ignores warnings of the item's evil (delivered most memorably by Jamie Campbell Bower as eccentric occult expert Alexander Babtiste) and enjoys its many blessings until the cursed object starts destroying those around her.

Much like the original *Witchboard* films, Russell's reimagining doesn't try to elevate its material or transcend genre. There's some hearty commentary on addiction, but the film knows its place overall and it sticks to being a slightly silly fright flick, hellbent on spreading the mayhem.

When the film finally gets to the good 'n' gory stuff, it rejoices in the violent kills, playing out like sequences from *Final Destination*, where a bizarre confluence of mishaps pile up just as the bodies do. The satisfaction in seeing what these doomed characters cannot is quite enjoyable, and there are many truly satisfying moments of malicious death here. Neither earnest nor superior, there is still an awful lot of charm in *Witchboard*.

DEIRDRE CRIMMINS

COCALIENS

JIMMY AND STIGGS

Starring Joe Begos, Matt Mercer and Riley Dandy
Written and directed by Joe Begos
The Horror Section/Iconic Events

Many independent auteurs have taken advantage of the convenience of shooting in their own apartments, but none have trashed the hell out of their living spaces like Joe Begos does in *Jimmy and Stiggs*. The filmmaker behind *Christmas Bloody Christmas* and *VFW* returns to his D.I.Y. roots with this blast of cinematic insanity that manages to be personal and totally off the rails at the same time.

The (kinda sorta) autobiographical part involves Begos playing an indie director named Jimmy Lang. No doubt he poured some of his own past frustrations into his acting, while amplifying them to the nth de-

gree. Having lost out on a job, Jimmy is drowning his sorrows in a sea of alcohol and cocaine when he becomes a victim of alien abduction. Or is it just a substance-fuelled hallucination? Whatever the case, Jimmy calls on his buddy Stiggs Randolph (Matt Mercer) for help, which Stiggs – who has sobered up his life – isn't inclined to give. Then the extraterrestrials return, and the duo must depend on each other and become warriors against the monstrous invasion.

Lo-fi and high energy, shot on 16mm for that extra rawness with coloured lighting that can best be described as "Mario Bava goes neon," *Jimmy and Stiggs* is a hurtling, heedless plunge into the outrageous. Begos, who made the film during COVID isolation with frequent collaborator Mercer, segues from volcanic arguments between their two characters to wildly splattery confrontations with the practically created aliens, drenching his pad with brightly hued blood.

A little of the movie's single-minded intensity may go a long way for some viewers, and so might the endless profanities with which Jimmy and Stiggs respond to the alien attack, each other, and pretty much everything else. There's a passion behind this project that spews from the screen, however, and an energizing sense that Begos is putting everything he can into the movie and his performance, limited means be damned.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

Jimmy and Stiggs

HOLLYWOOD WALK OF SHAME

TOGETHER

Starring Dave Franco, Alison Brie and Damon Herriman
Written and directed by Michael Shanks
Neon

Watching *Together*, it's easy to envision real-life Hollywood couple Dave Franco and Alison Brie treating the film as a cute little pet project, tossing Australian filmmaker Michael Shanks a bone for his feature debut via the clout of their combined star power. However, this movie doesn't do anyone any favours, least of all the audience.

Young couple Tim and Millie (Franco and Brie) have just moved to a country house so Millie can start a rural teaching gig, but Tim's manchild visions of fortysomething rock stardom has them clashing pretty quick. Exploring the wilderness near their new digs, the pair falls into a strange grotto. After drinking the water down there (I guess they haven't heard of typhoid in Tinseltown), they contract a strange condition where their flesh is compelled to fuse together. What the crap, you ask? Watch it, I guess, but don't expect to be satisfied by the answer.

Together's thin storyline isn't really the problem here, and the visual effects range from pretty decent to damn good as Tim and Millie strain and contort against the magnetic pull of their bodies. The problem is that they're unlikeable to the point of grating, making it impossible to root for them – individually or as a couple. The script seems undecided as to whether their toxic relationship is something they ought to flee or fight for, so the movie pads its stilted dialogue with sequences of endless screaming that makes one wish they'd fuse at the mouth if only to shut them up. Then there's the ending, which closes on a note that's almost interesting but cuts away before landing with any weight.

That Franco and Brie have just been slapped with a lawsuit for stealing the idea from a project they were pitched and turned down in 2020 is likely the thing that people will remember about this film, and maybe that's for the best.

ANDREA SUBISSATI

COULD USE FANGS

ABRAHAM'S BOYS

Starring Titus Welliver, Jocelin Donahue and Aurora Perrineau
Directed by Natasha Kermani
Written by Joe Hill and Natasha Kermani
RLJE

Whether he's portrayed as an eccentric professor in a tweed coat or a monster-hunting swashbuckler, any story of Van Helsing always ends with the death of Dracula, so it's intriguing that *Abraham's Boys* opens eighteen years after the demise of everyone's favourite count. The film, based on a story by Joe Hill, reintroduces Van Helsing (Titus Welliver) as a country doctor living in California with his two sons, Max (Brady Hepner) and Rudy (Judah Mackey), and their mother Mina (who apparently didn't marry Jonathan Harker after all). Life on their remote farm is quiet until Abraham begins to believe that the vampire plague he tried to end nearly twenty years earlier has followed him to America. Meanwhile, Max starts to wonder if his father is actually delusional and the monsters were never real at all.

The premise of an Old West sawbones having been a vampire slayer in another life is clever, and setting the film exclusively on the Van Helsing farm gives it an isolated atmosphere similar to *Night of the Living Dead*, making one wonder what might be happening in the outside world. But the subplot where Max questions his father's sanity conflicts with the main tale; although it unfolds like *Frailty*, where two brothers are coerced by their dad into killing people he claims are not human, *Abraham's Boys* removes the mystery by making it clear from the opening moments that Van Helsing is telling the truth.

The biggest downside, however, is the lack of actual vampires. Maybe that's unfair, but a movie about the most famous vampire slayer in all of

OVERLOOKED, FORGOTTEN AND DISMISSED

THIS ISSUE: LANCE CALLS IN THE CANNIBALS!

RARE EXPORT

CANNIBAL FARM

High Octane Pictures

In these uncertain times of tariffs, salmonella outbreaks, and overpriced eggs, please remember that you could save a couple bucks on your grocery bill by resorting to cannibalism! That's what happens in this British outing where a young boy is maimed by a prank gone horribly awry, and his father helps him collect new faces to replace his mangled one. And what to do with all that leftover meat? Luckily, he meets a group of discerning cannibals willing to pay top dollar for the choicest cuts of the lost campers and tourists he keeps caged up on his farm. With heavy-handed nods to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, it's a good watch with competent acting, some solid gore, and a couple of cool twists to make it interesting. Now, what to do with all those horrible British teeth?

BODY COUNT: 9

BEST DEATH: Pitchfork to the peepee!

SOUR SHOWER

CANNIBAL TROLL

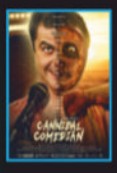
ITN Distribution

How many of you married broads took your mom and all your friends for a bridal shower out in the woods? None? That's what I thought – which makes this other British outing pretty crazy to begin with. That, plus the fact that they also bring one of their pregnant friends who looks like she might pop at any minute… what could possibly go wrong? As if that weren't enough, they find themselves being attacked by a troll after their first night – one that looks like it walked out of a nearby *Star Trek* convention still wearing its shitty, sweat-soaked, Spirit Halloween discount bin costume. All of that, coupled with lame-ass acting, shaky camerawork, and a ham-fisted lesbian B-story make this hard to review and even harder to watch. And then there's the ever more obvious question: wouldn't a "cannibal troll" be eating fellow trolls? What am I missing here?

BODY COUNT: 6

BEST DEATH: A saw to the crotch!

THE FUNNY BONE



CANNIBAL COMEDIAN

Cineverse

It's become increasingly rare that I come across films like this one that I absolutely want to gush about, so think of the previous two offerings as your appetizers and get ready for the main course! Writer/director/producer Sean Haitz has whipped up a funny, interesting, and very gory flick about a budding stand-up comedian who just happens to love the taste of human flesh. When he's not working hard at his side hustle selling meatball subs at his roadside food stand, our titular cannibal humourist uses his Bruce Campbell-esque good looks and finger-guns attitude to try out his act on his victims before shoving them through his meat grinder. Replete with a killer soundtrack and a zany supporting cast, I guarantee this one will leave you so satisfied that you won't have any room for dessert. Burp!

BODY COUNT: 11

BEST DEATH: Sledgehammer to the skull!

LAST CHANCE LANCE

fiction ought to bare some fangs. Instead, the film contents itself with being a portrait of a family grappling with its traumatic past: there aren't any big scares, just slow-mounting dread that climaxes a little too abruptly to be completely satisfying. That said, *Abraham's Boys* has a lot going for it, and even though the execution flounders, the film's ideas will leave seeds with you long after the credits are over.

MAGILL FOOTE

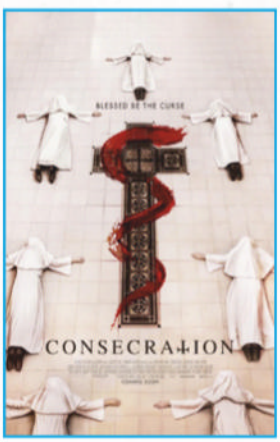
CURSED CONVENT

CONSECRATION

Starring Jena Malone, Danny Huston and Janet Suzman
Directed by Christopher Smith
Written by Christopher Smith and Laurie Cook
IFC Films

To one's delight or consternation, religious horror films rise from the baptismal font as often and as reliably as Sadako emerges from the well. Now it's writer/director Christopher Smith's turn to take a crack at the holy subgenre with *Consecration*, which doesn't break new ground so much as it treads familiar ground in sometimes interesting, sometimes frustrating ways.

After she's informed of her brother Michael's death, taciturn ophthalmologist Grace (Jena Malone) travels to Scotland to tend to matters, but those matters are more complicated than she expected: for one, the police are convinced that Michael killed a fellow priest before offing himself. The nuns at Mount Saviour Convent, where Michael served, tell Grace that her brother was possessed by a demon. Grace believes that Michael was actually murdered. To get to the bottom of everything, she will have to reflect on her family history as well as the origins of the convent, which is being (re)consecrated by the Vatican to lift the vibe and what may be a curse dating back to the Crusades.



Yeah, it's a lot. But if you've seen Smith's 2009 film *Triangle* then you know he can throw a labyrinthian story at you and provide an enthralling ride. It's a bummer, then, that *Consecration* doesn't quite meet those expectations, and even more so that its horror notes are fairly rote. Shadowy figures lurking behind our protagonist, nuns doing weird stuff – yeah, I'm on board, but only because I've seen it all before. It's an odd choice to make what is ostensibly a character piece about Grace ultimately be a rather shallow dive into who she is. But after her terrific ensemble work in films such as *The Ruins* and *Neon Demon*, it's nice to see Malone in the spotlight.

If there's a unique angle to *Consecration*, it's that Smith and co-writer Laurie Cook are appropriately sly in describing the lengths the church will go to in or-

Best Wishes To All

der to amass power. What do "good" and "evil" mean for us when evil acts in the name of good and vice versa? Tune in next Sunday to find out!

STACIE PONDER

THE PRICE OF HAPPINESS

BEST WISHES TO ALL

Starring Kotone Furukawa and Koya Matsudai
Directed by Yûta Shimotsu
Written by Yûta Shimotsu and Rumi Kakuta
Shudder

Produced by Takashi Shimizu (director of *The Grudge*), *Best Wishes to All* is the debut feature from writer/director Yûta Shimotsu and it offers an intriguing comment on modern society's quest for happiness that's marred by a too-slow buildup and largely predictable scares. Although it attacks Japan most potently, the film's ironic, blood-tipped barbs hit home on Western soil as well.

Best Wishes to All opens with a young woman (Kotone Furukawa, *Cloud*) leaving her Tokyo nursing school to visit her grandparents at their rural home. She soon begins to question their odd behaviour – are they suffering from dementia, or is something else going on behind a mysteriously locked door? A handsome young neighbour (Koya Matsudai) offers support but ultimately can't help her as the family unravels. When her parents and younger brother arrive, the gruesome events ramp up and she unearths deeper secrets that threaten to upend her entire reality.

Best Wishes to All incorporates a modest use of makeup effects which are largely well-done, providing some genuinely disturbing images and unexpected black humour. Shimotsu makes fine use of his cast and the location in particular; a community set on the edge of a mountain range that is both photogenic and eerily isolated. Furukawa is a likeable heroine who begins with a strong moral centre that wobbles as she learns darker truths. Characters are left unnamed, more defined by their prescribed roles within the family unit than their individual personalities, lending the film an ultimate message of fatalistic lack of choice.

Best Wishes to All unveils its theme at about its halfway point, and the first half takes its time getting there – meaning that even at 89 minutes, it feels a tad long. However, from that big reveal

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SHORT CUTS

BITE-SIZED FRIGHTS FOR SMALL APPETITES

ON THE SLAB: GOING FOR GROSS

FIVE COURSE MEAL

7:22 mins/YouTube via Bourdon Creative Inc's Channel

Married couple Mark (Murray Farnell) and Jenny (Melissa Kwasek) need to make ends meet, so they sign up for an experimental study that sees them living together for a month in a single room, with only a bed and a toilet. At mealtime, two trays of food are pushed into the room through a small hole. The food is incredibly delicious but, oddly, the couple can't seem to eat their fill, and thus begins the revolting overindulgence of Canadian filmmaker James Cadden's *Five Course Meal*. Based on a short story by Josh Saltzman, this simple tale is brought to life by disgusting practical effects courtesy of Edmonton-based Bold Raven FX, nightmarish ASMR, and committed performances from its two leads. Viewers are strongly recommended not to watch this piece before or after a meal, as its climax is positively stomach-turning.

BAD HAIR

14:30 mins/Vimeo via Stellar's Channel

Leo (Sten Karpov) had resigned himself to the loss of his hair, until he discovers a mail-order miracle cure that he is more than happy to try. The instructions, amounting to four images printed on a small slip of paper, are simple enough: shave, apply, cover, and wait. He applies the thick goo to his dome liberally and then anxiously anticipates the results. With *Bad Hair*, Estonian director Oskar Lehemaa swings for the rafters and shows off his many years working in advertising, with a short that devilishly combines elements of Cronenberg, *Creepshow*, and *The Peanut Butter Solution*. While visceral and cringeworthy to a point where it's hard to watch, the pyrotechnics and the fact that it's so effective with zero dialogue are even more impressive. *Bad Hair* later found its way into the 2022 television anthology *Beyond the Dark* and Lehemaa has since found a home for himself in animation.

WOACA

13:33 mins/Vimeo via mr.groceries' Channel

This short begins with a lady (Sidse Babett Knudsen) known only as "WOACA" (Woman of a Certain Age) going through a repetitive self-care regimen in front of the bathroom mirror. One day, she discovers a pimple that seems to get worse no matter what preventative action she takes, until it becomes the absolute bane of her existence to horrific ends. With *WOACA*, accomplished actress Mackenzie Davis (*Blade Runner 2049*, *Black Mirror*) gets behind the camera to delve into the subject of the unwinnable battle against aging; another striking work that is told visually with no dialogue and only ambient sound until the explosive climax. Knudsen emotes strongly in this piece, recalling Demi Moore's pre-date mirror sequence in *The Substance*, illustrating how the more one holds themselves to impossible standards, the more one's state of mind will wither. A terrific piece of work that will undoubtedly have your stomach in knots.

JAY CLARKE

onward it becomes far more assured and leads to a satisfyingly nihilistic ending.

LISA MORTON

RAISING THE DEAD 2.0

BRING HER BACK

Starring Billy Barratt, Sally Hawkins and Sora Wong
Directed by Danny and Michael Philippou
Written by Danny Philippou and Bill Hinzman

After a surprise sleeper hit with 2022's *Talk to Me*, expectations were reasonably high for the Philippou brothers' follow-up. The highly anticipated sequel to that debut feature is slated for release later this year, but *TtM* fans can rest assured that the filmmakers are well able to bottle lightning twice in a row – *Bring Her Back* is a brutal horror mystery that takes common possession tropes and twists them into something wildly original and truly frightening.

When their dad dies unexpectedly, stepsiblings Andy (Billy Barratt) and Piper (Sora Wong) insist on staying together in foster care for another few months, until Andy is old enough to be Piper's guardian. The pair find a temporary home with Laura (Sally Hawkins), a woman still grieving the loss of her daughter Cathy, and the creepy foster kid she calls Oliver (Jonah Wren Phillips). It isn't long before Laura is able to drive a wedge between Piper and Andy, eroding the partially blind girl's faith in her brother and pouring psychological salt into his fresh wounds. But Laura's got another pet project going on, something that links her dead daughter with the mysterious, mute Oliver, and the ring of salt that encircles the house…

Long story short, *Bring Her Back* delivers the full package in much the same way *Talk to Me* did – through tight dialogue, credible characters, and shifting sympathies – but the similarities end there. While the latter film took a simple conceit and spun a fun, spooky yarn out of it, *Bring Her Back* is more subdued in its mystery and way more vicious in its violence. Much of the supernatural element is implied through speculation and grainy videotape footage but the Philippous don't hold back when it comes to the graphic gore, which sears with a ferocity reminiscent of Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala's psychological shockers. And if you think you've seen every possible way a human being can seek to raise the dead, *Bring Her Back* suggests that there are far uglier means than you've ever considered. Hang on to your teeth!

ANDREA SUBISSATI

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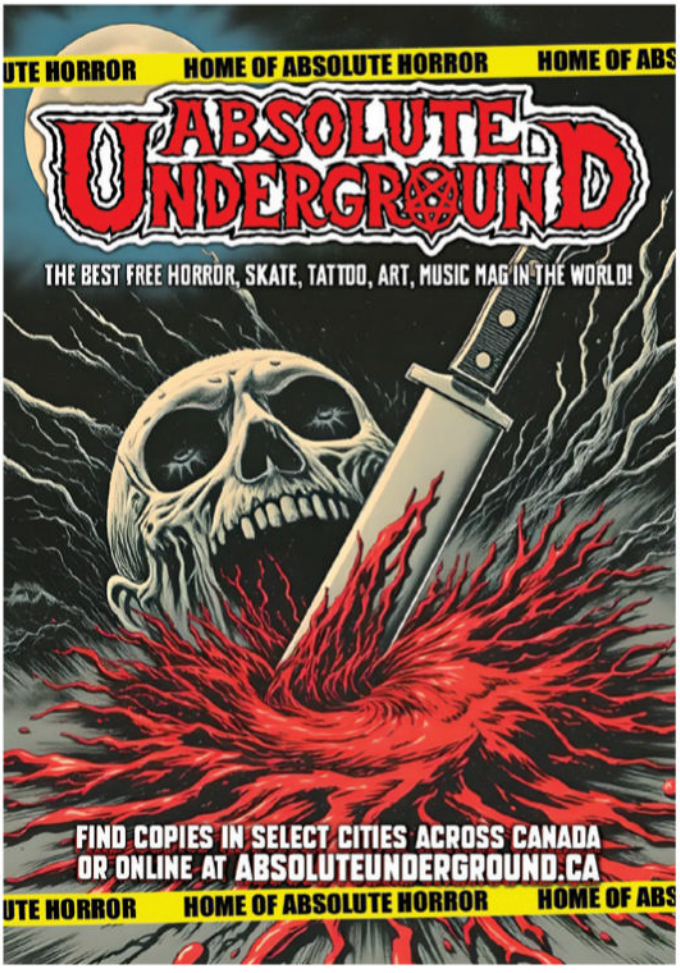
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AS THE *HELL HOUSE LLC* FRANCHISE WRAPS UP WITH ITS FIFTH FILM, *RUE MORGUE* SPEAKS TO JOE BANDELLI, PRODUCER AND PART-TIME CLOWN

RETURN TO ABADDON

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

Amidst the crowded field of found-footage supernatural features, the *Hell House LLC* franchise has scared up a cult following since the first film's release in 2016. After a trilogy set at the haunted Abaddon Hotel, 2023's *Hell House LLC Origins: The Carmichael Manor* delved into the backstory tied to the titular mansion and won the strongest critical response of any of the sequels. Now, *Hell House LLC: Lineage* (hitting theatres August 20 from Terror Films and Iconic Events, then streaming exclusively on Shudder in October) is wrapping up the dual storylines – and forgoing the handheld vérité format.

"When [writer/director] Stephen Cognetti was coming up with the script for *Lineage*," says producer Joe Bandelli, who has been forming the franchise with Cognetti from the start, "a lot of the scares weren't translating to the found-footage format like they had in years past. The decision was made to venture into new territory not only for the effectiveness of the horror, but also to keep the franchise fresh and give the fans something new to dive into. We always try to find better ways to maintain the dread and retain certain elements, and traditional narrative storytelling was the way we were able to make it work with this movie."

In *Lineage*, Elizabeth Vermilyea returns from 2019's *Hell House LLC III: Lake of Fire* as documentarian Vanessa Shepherd, who moves back to Abaddon, plagued by nightmares and guilt from that movie's terrible events. She quickly discovers that the evil isn't done with her yet, nor others in town. Meanwhile, *The Carmichael Manor*'s Searra Sawka also encores as inquisitive journalist Alicia Cavalini, researching the hotel and manor's pernicious past and present. Other actors reprise their roles as members of the Carmichael family – and Bandelli himself takes his fifth turn portraying the ominous clowns that manifest the malignance infesting Abaddon.

"Becoming the clown started out as a necessity and then turned into a personal need," Bandelli admits. "In the original [film], multiple people wore the costume, but as soon as we realized how well people were reacting to the clown, I wanted to jump into the suit and mask again. Since the second film, I've played the *Hell House LLC* Clown, as well as the other two introduced in *The Carmichael Manor*. The best part about being in the mask as a filmmaker is that it helps with the scares. There are plenty of times when I put the mask on that I view things from, well, the clown's perspective, and while Stephen is crafting the shot or working with the actors, I can see how scenes play out and make choices that add another element of creepiness. You'd be surprised how a simple head turn, an arm movement or following someone's actions can change how frightening a scene is."

Hell House LLC: Lineage was announced as the franchise's final film – but then, so was *Lake of Fire* when it debuted. However, Bandelli assures fans that this is the true curtain call, and one that remains loyal to the spirit of the series from the start.

"Stephen and I agree that this has to be our last one," he says. "We are very fortunate and grateful to our fans for following us on this journey and sticking with us through five films, but we have many more ideas and projects we want to jump into. We hope that *Lineage* gives everyone the conclusion they want – though we do know that not every question will be answered, and that might upset some people. We just want all our fans to know that we have always crafted these movies with them in mind, and we could not tell the stories we have told without them."

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REISSUED & REANIMATED

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

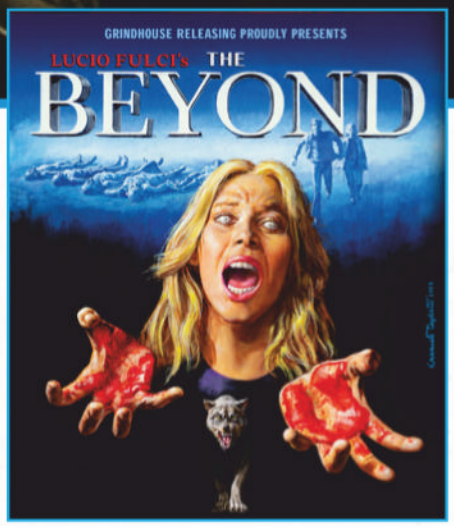
BEYOND THE *7 DOORS OF DEATH*

Back in the good old days of the 1980s, long before online research was a thing, horror fans could head out to see the latest fright release with no idea of what they'd actually be seeing. Retitlings of productions both old and new were common; unless you perused the credits in the newspaper ads closely, you could go to the movie known as *Horror Planet* in the U.S. without knowing it was the flick that had been covered in genre magazines as *Inseminoid*. And even the credits could be (intentionally) deceiving; one of this writer's most memorable encounters with the latter occurred when I headed with a friend to a matinee showing of a supernatural shocker called *7 Doors of Death* in November 1983.

Topped by laudatory quotes from no less than *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* creators Tobe Hooper and Kim Henkel, the print ad for *7 Doors* promised an in-your-face horrific experience. The billing block credited the director as "Louis Fuller," the scriptwriter as "Roy Corchoran," and the producer as Terry Levene, head of distributor Aquarius Releasing, so as far as I knew, this was a homegrown cinematic product. Once the movie started, however, I got a familiar vibe; the cinematic style had a feeling that I recognized as "Italian horror" even then, when I'd had limited experience with such films. Then the 1927-set prologue came to its climax, with the "ungodly warlock" crucified and dissolving, and a light switch went on in my head. I had seen that image before, specifically in a British genre mag, and it was from Lucio Fulci's *The Beyond*. It was one of those little aha moments you could have as a horror fan back then, when there was a Wild West quality to the distribution of scary movies, especially foreign ones.

It's for that reason that, to me, the most exciting part of Grindhouse Releasing's new Deluxe Edition of *The Beyond* is its inclusion of the *7 Doors* cut. That version is presented on a DVD, accompanying a UHD, three Blu-rays, and a CD in Grindhouse's set. *7 Doors* has been on DVD before – an out-of-print 2000 release from Diamond Entertainment – yet this is the first time in *The Beyond*'s storied disc history that Aquarius' cut, trimmed by about seven minutes and rescored, has been offered alongside Fulci's intact original for comparing and contrasting. The most obvious difference is that a good deal of the graphic bloodshed is gone, as *The Beyond/7 Doors* – unlike Fulci's *Zombie*, *City of the Living Dead/The Gates of Hell* and *The House by the Cemetery* – was watered down for an R rating in the U.S.

Since print or negative materials weren't available, Grindhouse's *7 Doors* is sourced from a one-inch video master, and accompanied by



interviews with Levene and editor Jim Markovic, plus promotional materials. And that's just a small fraction of what Grindhouse has on offer in the Deluxe package. Previously issued in a very limited, webstore-only "Eye of Eibon Edition" including a plastic eyeball, and an even more limited bundle with a Joe the Plumber action figure, Grindhouse's *The Beyond* is now coming in wider release July 29. It boasts a fresh 4K scan from the original camera negative, a "composer's cut" with new music by original scorer Fabio Frizzi (also collected on the CD), three archival audio commentaries, a huge assortment of vintage and newly created interview featurettes, trailers, stills, etc.

Never mind seven doors, it may take you seven days to get through all the material assembled in what will likely be the last word on *The Beyond* on disc.

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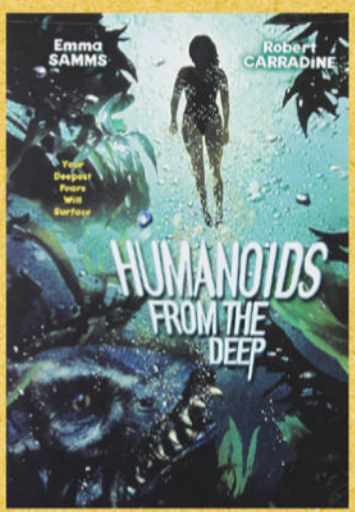
IT CAME FROM BOWEN'S BASEMENT

R DRIVE-INS, DELETE BINS AND OTHER SINS

The 'Noids to Avoid

by John W. Bowen

Shitty remakes – which I guess means most remakes, though certainly not all – tend to wind up in one of two ignoble piles. Pile one is for titles that live in infamy as cautionary examples, yardsticks by which other shitty remakes are measured and, occasionally, as fodder for trivia nights. Try as you might to expunge them from memory, you'll likely recall rotten reduxes of *The Fog* (2005), *Friday the 13th* (2009), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010) or that time Rob Zombie wiped his ass with the mighty *Halloween* and then made an even more ass-wipey sequel two years later. Pile two is less a pile than a black hole the others vanish into, the ones that next to no one even saw in the first place. (I could drop lotsa names here too, but you'd just be all like, "What, seriously, when did they remake that?") And seldom has any film represented the platonic ideal of Pile two quite so, er, platonically as the charmless, loveless 1996 retread of *Humanoids from the Deep*.



If you've any doubts about my own affection for the original 1980 Roger Corman creach feach, take a closer gander at this column's now-iconic header design and stand corrected. The O.G. *'Noids* played a pivotal role in my budding nerddom back in my salad bar days and yet I'd all but forgotten renting and schlepping through a VHS of this remake at some point in the late '90s. In fact, it was in preparation to participate in a *Humanoids*-themed episode of Aaron Christensen's *Horror 101* podcast earlier this year that I remembered this beshitted thing's existence and decided to give it another spin, to my immediate butt-clenching regret.

Written and directed by Jeff Yonis (*Bloodfist V*, basically the *Witchboard III* of the *Bloodfist* franchise), *'Noids* '96 repackages the basics of the original – in which ill-advised enviro-fuckery spawns slimy, amphibious, homicidal, and very rapey fish-men who wreak havoc on a seaside hamlet – with a cast of decent B-leads: Robert Carradine, Emma Samms, Mark Rolston, and the inevitable Clint Howard. We've swapped out the original's let's-supersize-the-salmon corporate shenanigans for a military-industrial complex amphibio-super-soldier schtick – not sure what the point was there, but making your obligatory junk science angle even more far-fetched than before seems an unforgivable pooch-screw when so much is getting phoned in on both sides of the lens.

At a glance, the trashy, exploitative content of the original that sent feminists and evangelists alike into a frenzy of white-knuckled pearl-clutching would appear to have been toned down here. But even if the remake does back off a bit on the most extreme content, it's only just a bit; a more discerning look will reveal that it's not so much less violent than much less *convincingly* violent.

What feels like some kind of work-to-rule policy goes right across the board; for instance, there's comparatively little actual monster action beyond nearly stationary headshots and scaly limbs suddenly reaching into the frame. And what's with all this celluloid recycling? Early on, some action shots had me muttering, "Well, that's certainly faithful to the source material," before I gave my head a shake and realized they were actually dumping in footage from the original. Like, a veritable *buttload* of it. Underwater monster images, the fishing boat explosion, the house explosion, the carnival scene and – look away, Paige Reynolds! – that entire sequence where Buster the family Golden Retriever gets noshed by a 'noid.

The original *Humanoids* is a classic made-to-order genre picture. No wheels got reinvented, which is fine, but goddamned if it didn't deliver the goods efficiently, generously, and with infectious energy. Violence, nudity, cool critter designs, small-town soap opera subplots, explosions, more violence, more nudity, rinse, repeat. Without belittling the efforts of all involved, we revere it as an example of just how much fun basic, utilitarian genre cinema can be. Hence, it begs the question: if a remake absolutely has to happen, *how freakin' hard could it really be* not to embarrass the original? Riddle me this and get the hell out of my basement.

Horror in Culture & Entertainment

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GHOUL NEXT DOOR

AN UNCANNY COTERIE: CONFESSIONS OF A CREEPY DOLL COLLECTOR

BY S. ELIZABETH

HORROR FILMS HAVE TRAINED US TO BE CREEPED OUT BY DOLLS. CHUCKY'S MANIACAL GRIN IN *CHILD'S PLAY*, Annabelle's hollow stare, the malevolent clown from *Poltergeist* – from feral fetish dolls to possessed puppets to murderous mechanical moppets like M3GAN, cinema has long weaponized their fixed gazes, their too-perfect features, their uncanny stillness. Each new horror franchise adds another entry to the catalogue of killer toys, embedding the image deeper into our collective nightmares.

But… their sweet little faces! Their charming antique frocks! Their weird, unblinking, soul-penetrating glass eyeballs that follow you around the room!

My shelves are lined with exactly these supposed nightmare objects – porcelain beauties frozen in expressions that hover somewhere between naive innocence and sly knowing, their painted mouths perpetually on the verge of murmuring secrets too low to be heard, in a strange, strangled chirruping language you wouldn't understand even if that delirium of sibilance did reach your ears.

"Aren't you afraid they'll murder you in your sleep?" visitors inevitably ask, only half-joking.

"ANTIQUE DOLLS OCCUPY PERFECT HORROR TERRITORY – THEY'RE ALMOST HUMAN BUT NOT QUITE."

No, but I understand cinema's obsession with making them villains. Antique dolls occupy perfect horror territory – they're almost human but not quite. They're designed to mimic life while remaining fundamentally lifeless. That tension creates ideal conditions for horror, which has always thrived in liminal spaces.

My fascination began with an elaborately dressed beauty perched atop my childhood chest of drawers, a vision in periwinkle and pearl, so high I could barely reach her skirts. She was the fanciest thing my seven-year-old self had ever seen, her heavily lashed gaze seeming to urge: "Let's be fancy, Sarah. Let's be fancy forever…!" – my own private version of those weird Overlook Hotel twins and their chilling invitation.

My collection has grown haphazardly through

flea markets and estate sales. I know nothing about manufacturers or production eras. I acquire them through instinct and vibes – something in their expression either speaks to me, twists my heart, clutches at my gut, or it doesn't. The eyeless porcelain lady whose head tilts at a questioning angle. The boudoir beauty whose shabby wig keeps slipping off (because she is also minus a scalp). The serene, milk-faced baby whose clenched fist eternally clasps a missing rattle. Or knife?

For decades, horror directors have mined this same territory. Stuart Gordon's 1986 film *Dolls* masterfully plays with the contradiction at these objects' core with loads of camp and dark humour. Before unleashing the porcelain figures as vengeful killers, his camera lingers lovingly on their craftsmanship – the painted features, the detailed costumes, the technical artistry. This film understands that their power comes not just from their potential for terror but from their inherent qualities.

The dolls weren't made to be creepy. Their exaggerated features – impossibly large eyes, perfect complexions, slightly parted lips – represented period ideals of childhood beauty. What reads as disturbing to modern eyes was once pure, unadulterated sentimentality. We find them unsettling precisely because they exist in that uncertain territory Freud called "the uncanny" – they're familiar yet strange, comforting yet threatening, lifeless yet seemingly poised to animate at any moment. They hover in that liminal space between object and entity, where we can't quite categorize what we're looking at.

The trope is so ubiquitous that it permeates every corner of pop culture. There's even a *Magic: The Gathering* card called "Creepy Doll" with flavour text reading: "A child's porcelain doll went missing one night, as did a pair of kitchen shears and the town magistrate."

What draws us to objects that others find unsettling? The same impulse that draws us to horror films, I think – a hunger for experiences at the edges of comfort that challenge our perception of what's familiar and what's strange. Francis Bacon understood this tension when he observed, "There is no exquisite beauty without some strangeness in the proportion." That strangeness isn't a flaw – it's a prerequisite for the most interesting and profound forms of gorgeousness.

In my home, I arrange the dolls in deliberate tableaux that acknowledge their inherent duality: three identical faces positioned in a silent tribunal, judging unseen transgressions. These compositions transform my shelves into miniature theatres of ambiguity – each viewer projecting their own fears or fascinations onto the frozen porcelain players.

I don't collect these dolls to unnerve my guests, though I confess to a private satisfaction when their eyes dart uneasily across my displays. I'm drawn to the contested territory these figures inhabit – that balance between beauty and menace, where tiny ambassadors from the uncanny valley silently question our comfortable categories of innocence and knowledge. I offer placating smiles, but in private moments, I sometimes glimpse what they see: that knife-edge instant where objects of beauty become watchful, waiting – possibly wicked! – presences.

And certainly, if I wanted to exact the odd bit of vengeance, I know through what vessels I'd channel my intent. I already possess my uncanny coterie of perfect, precious assassins.

IN THIS ISSUE

BETWEENERS
Adam Carter and Armin Ozdik
Independent

BLUE PALO VERDE #1
Ray Fawkes and Rimanti Nurdarina
Mad Cave

THE PALE KNIGHT #1
Peter Milligan and Val Rodrigues
Mad Cave

MANSECT
Koga Shinichi
Smudge

LOS MONSTRUOS #1
James Robinson and Jesús Merino
Dark Horse

THE BROODING MUSE: BOOK ONE AND TWO
Zack Slattery and Max Brody
Cherry Bomb LLC

BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS

BY PEDRO CABEZUELO

Is your loved one suffering from a pesky bout of possession? There are few exorcists around that can handle the job better than Shane Beck. Equally adept at using a pen knife and salt as crucifixes and holy water, his skills have less to do with Beck being a maverick and more about his also being the victim of possession… except in his case, it's not a demon inhabiting his body but the soul of an ex-conman and recent fugitive from Hell. So begins *Betweeners*, a new graphic novel by writer Adam Carter and artist Armin Ozdik, which dares to send the exorcism genre spinning on its head.

"It started with a relatively simple thought: what would a secular exorcist look like?" reveals Carter. "I wanted to tell a story rooted in demonic possession, without the same religious themes and iconography many other authors and filmmakers had already perfected through the years. I struggled with that idea for a little while, because in a world where demons exist, why wouldn't an exorcist avail themselves of religious tools to banish them back to Hell? Then it hit me: what if this person couldn't – because they were also possessed themselves?"

Key to the book's success is the character of Mike Baxter, the soul taking up residence in Beck's body. He's a grifter that found himself suffering in Hell for decades and yet manages to evoke sympathy from the reader regardless of past crimes – in this case, deadly arson. Much of this sympathy occurs when Beck's estranged son, James, suddenly appears on the scene and Baxter finds himself on an unplanned road towards redemption as he tries to mend the relationship by pretending to be the boy's father.

"At his worst, Baxter is an opportunist who is willfully ignorant of the harms he's causing because of his thinly veiled separation from physical violence," Carter explains. "At his best, he's someone who has finally accepted his flaws and is working to change them. Is he a good person? Is he a bad person? It's tough to say. He's the walking embodiment of, 'If you got another chance, would you make the most of it?'"

Of course, Hell isn't just going to stand by and let one of its inmates escape. Indeed, one of the reasons Baxter became a reborn-again exorcist was to stay one step ahead of the demons. But soon Baxter and James find themselves under attack by one of Hell's top agents, a rather nasty creature by the name of Iarelli.

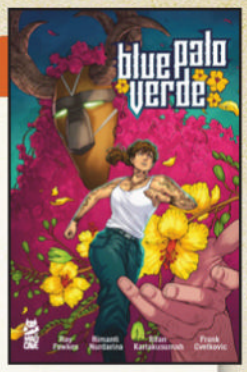
It's a chance for Carter and Ozdik to cut loose and have some fun, painting a garish portrait of Hell filled with deserts, amusement parks, and television. Lost souls, twisted and deformed servants, and a hierarchy of lords and masters are among the denizens in this ever-transforming landscape which appears to have a mind of its own. It's an unexpected bit of world-building as Carter creates a unique version of Hell that hints at many corners and players yet to be seen.

"I liked the idea of interconnected personalized hells, where the damned essentially create their torment borne out of their greatest fears, regrets, and insecurities," he says. "What if your Hell was being forced to relive watching a loved one die while you were powerless to help them? That idea of the power that enduring, deep-seated trauma holds over people also led me to include relics from Earth in my version of Hell, which is littered with some of humanity's greatest horrors and tragedies (e.g. the Titanic and WWII battlefields). Plus, this version of Hell is sentient – an idea I'd love to expand upon if I get to continue this story."

Betweeners: *Who better to conduct an exorcism than a man possessed?*

FOLLOW PEDRO ON X @PCABEZUELO

QUICK CUTS



Having recently viewed *The Wicker Man*, that movie was fresh in my mind when I sat down to read *Blue Palo Verde*. Like the film, the story concerns a protagonist searching for someone in a small, isolated community whose strange pagan customs point toward something deadly. In this case, our hero is Kristine Woods, just released from prison and looking for her missing father in the small town of Promise, New Mexico. Arriving during a town festival, Kristine finds unease in the festivities as it's obvious the community is holding back information pertaining to her search… and all the ceremonial talk of sacrifices isn't doing much to help. Like the most effective folk horrors, *Blue Palo Verde* takes what should be a reassuring and comforting setting – a rural small town full of friendly people – and inverts it into something sinister, where outsiders are not so much unwelcome as unwitting pawns in a devious game.

In order to save his son's life from the Black Death, Sir Hugh de Grey, the eponymous Pale Knight, makes a deal with Death itself. The cost? He must take another's life. Similar bargains have seen dealmakers wrestling with the idea of committing murder for the first time, but de Grey is no stranger to doling out death. In fact, he's quite tired of it, questioning his service to the Crown, and wishing nothing more then to spend the rest of his life at peace with his family. That grim dilemma is yet another piece in the dismal puzzle of 1349 England that author Peter Milligan has assembled. Plague and starvation are widespread, corrupt knights are all too eager to massacre innocents, and even de Grey's squire is a mouthy little brat who believes the Black Death is God's punishment on the unholy. But most disturbing of all is the possibility that in order to survive in such a decaying world, a good man has no choice but to descend to its level.

Perry Cutter is an ex-cop PI trying to make a living in the big city during the 1950s, which ain't easy when you also happen to be a werewolf and that big city happens to be Los Monstruos, populated by vampires, ghouls, mummies, human flies, and anything else your mind can conjure. Perry's latest case: find a missing vampire for her human ex-lover so he can give her the long goodbye. Of course, this is a noir pastiche, so expect anything and everything to go wrong. James Robinson leans heavily into the genre's trappings, but that's part of the fun of the book; the other being all the monsters and how they fit into the hard-boiled detective work, whether it's the tough team of vampire cops known as the Night Shift or the cute vampire diner waitress Cutter flirts with. Jesús Merino's appealing character designs and the book's vibrant use of colour add to the fun.

Depressed by his mother's death, young Hideo isolates himself from the rest of humanity and seeks solace in his bugs. Obsessed with the insect world, Hideo soon finds himself metamorphosing into a creature that is half man, half insect – a "mansect," you might say. But Hideo's transformation is not limited to himself, and others around him also begin to inexplicably cocoon and hatch into bizarre, bloodsucking monsters. Eschewing the traditional science-run-amok/supernatural narratives found in most man-beast stories, *Mansect* instead draws more from Kafka, positing that these transformations might very well be humanity's evolutionary course. Hideo and friends aren't so much abominations as nature's attempt to find a balance between the human race and the miraculous world it inhabits. This thematic exploration is one of the many reasons *Mansect* continues to resonate 50 years after its initial publication; the grotesque body horror is a bonus.

The Brooding Muse Books 1 and 2 reprint the hit magazine-cum-comic series that began in 2021 with some additional material, in preparation for new upcoming chapters. These are the very definition of "underground comics," overflowing with big ideas but still rough around the edges; expect odd punctuation, strange syntax, and the need to overexplain – while somehow managing to under-explain – the plot (which I'm not even going to attempt to summarize here; just think 'apocalypse,' 'quest,' and 'gore'). But rather than hamper the material, it adds to the somewhat schizophrenic, dizzying, fever-dream experience of reading these books (especially in one sitting). These are creators who have no compunction about mercilessly hitting the reader with bizarre scenario after bizarre scenario, whether it's giant mutant rats, lava monsters, zombies, shape-shifting serial killers, lethal trees, ghosts, vampires, and disembodied floating fangs; and that's just a quick, and by no means exhaustive, sample. It's a reading experience you're unlikely to forget, and if it means putting up with the odd misspelling and statements that read like questions, it's worth it.

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QUEER SLASHERS

Peter Marra

Indiana University Press

The tough thing about engaging with cinema from the perspective of any marginalized group is understanding and articulating how the othered are represented, distorted, or appropriated for shock value. From a queer lens, we're seeing parts of someone's life (or even aspects of life they might wish they could call their own) filtered through heteronormativity and biases, both conscious and unconscious.

Throughout *Queer Slashers*, author Peter Marra navigates a genre of film he loves while traversing its more problematic areas and examining how both straight and queer filmmakers have told queer stories. Marra mentions that there's an element of drag to many onscreen killers, which is certainly thought-provoking. Freddy Krueger, no stranger to such analysis given the heavily queer-coded *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*, has an element of identity defiance in his own right: he can transform to appear as anyone, yet he is one of the few slashers from the '80s not to don a mask, opting instead to rub his gnarled, burned visage in the faces of his victims.

Marra also butts heads with the concept of "respectability politics," wherein one trades their queer identity for respectability. This marks a significant contrast to the queer-coded killer attacking heteronormativity in films such as *Dracula's Daughter*, *Freddy's Revenge*, and *Serial Mom*, but intriguingly comes into play when Marra writes about Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the Lake*. That film presents a homosexual killer on a cruising beach who makes his lover his first victim before later bumping off a heterosexual detective, suggesting that while queer people can have the normality of a decriminalized or even accepted life, they're always at risk of being the monster. Tantalizingly in *Lake*, it also puts them at risk of being the victim in contrast to earlier queer-coded monsters and killers.

Given the original slasher boom and newer horrors from more prominent LGTBQ+ creators, Marra's analysis is recommended alongside such famed analytical classics as Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*.

ADAM CLARKE

SPOOKY SCIENCE

Meagan Ankney and Paige Miller

Castle

From the sister-in-law duo behind the *Spooky Science Sisters* podcast, comes this book about the science of ghosts, monsters, cryptids, extraterrestrials, and more. If you're twitching at science and the supernatural being mentioned in the same sentence, let me assure you that these ladies take the science part seriously, and if *Spooky Science* is apt to do anything, it's to turn readers into skeptics rather than believers.

The book opens with introductions, and an explanation of the scientific method and how it relates to the study of the paranormal, before diving into the various topics at hand. The section on ghosts is the largest, discussing their history, investigation, what sorts of things cause people to believe they've experienced a haunting, and the tools used to hunt them. Where possible, evidence is presented from proper scientific studies and attention is called to the research and theories that remain disputed. The latter section – covering monsters (from werewolves and vampires to the boogeyman), cryptids, urban legends, and aliens – is presented in similar fashion, looking at the origins of the myths and legends and then the science. Keeners can even test their knowledge with the short quizzes provided.

Nothing in *Spooky Science* ever gets too in-depth, making the illustrated book a fast and breezy read at 212 pages. Though it packs some rewarding tidbits (did you know, for instance, that the Mesopotamians tended to bury their relatives "under the floors of their homes?"), much of this stuff will be old news to readers who already have an established skeptical interest in the subject matter. Still, authors Meagan Ankney and Paige Miller are likeable and conversational throughout (and not afraid to toss in a witty quip), thus *Spooky Science* should successfully drive new listeners to their podcast, as light and satisfying is still satisfying after all.

Make it a beach read.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

THAT VERY WITCH: FEAR, FEMINISM, AND THE AMERICAN WITCH FILM

Payton McCarty-Simas

Academia Lunare

When it comes to witch cinema, there are plenty of films to look to as examples of the wide breadth of representation. From *Practical Magic* and *The Craft*, to *Häxan* and *The Crucible*, there are romantic witches, vengeful witches, Sabrina the teenage witches, and just about everything in between. In *That Very Witch: Fear, Feminism, and the American Witch Film*, author Payton McCarty-Simas weaves together the more recent history of witches in American cinema with the contemporary culture and politics of their times. Best of all, it's a bewitching read.

After a brief but mighty introduction into the process of evaluation and approach, *That Very Witch* goes through the stages of cinematic witches from 1960 to present day. It acknowledges their deep history as they relate to feminism and misogyny, and analyses the ways that these trends play off one another and the history of the monstrous feminine. With detailed research and a thorough filmography, the essay book contextualizes much of the history of American witch cinema in the grander history of the world.

Even with this dense topic and even denser academic research, *That Very Witch* is approachable and digestible. McCarty-Simas takes the time to explain the potentially opaque topics in congenial language. As parallels are being drawn from riot grrrls to Hilary Clinton to *The Craft*, there is enough colour and gentle handholding to make these leaps feel more like easy steps, being led by a capable guide.

All the while, *That Very Witch* keeps its focus

That Very Witch: The Craft *(1996)*

on the movies. While there is plenty of value in the other cultural touchstones sharing the same air as these pictures, television and politics are not the main focus here. *That Very Witch* is all about witches on the silver screen, and it does the topic justice.

DEIRDRE CRIMMINS

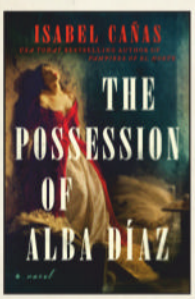
THE POSSESSION OF ALBA DÍAZ

Isabel Cañas

Berkley

After tackling gothic fiction in *The Hacienda* and bloodsuckers in *Vampires of El Norte*, Mexican-American author Isabel Cañas returns with a violent, 1760s-set possession tale, which she considers her grisliest story yet.

When we first meet alchemist Elías Monterrubio, he's headed to Spain at his grandfather's behest: the father Elías has not spoken to in twenty years has returned. It's a lie, though. In fact, his father is dead, and Elías must travel to Zacatecas in hopes of paying off his father's debts and saving the failing family mine. No easy feat, given Elías' own troubled reputation and questionable past; one further complicated by his introduction to Alba Díaz de Bolaños, the woman betrothed to his cousin (in an arrangement that has more to do with convenience than love). As Alba's mysterious possession worsens, Elías realizes his esoteric knowledge, while forbidden, could help, but the forces at play may be more powerful than he alone can handle.



Part historical fiction and part possession tale, the beliefs and mores of the period only serve to raise the stakes for both Elías (for daring to have anything to do with Alba or dark magic) and Alba, who is constrained not just by the malevolent force that has invaded her, but also the social dictates for women of the time, resulting in a lack of personal autonomy and perpetual religious threat.

As in Cañas' other books, there's a strong romantic current running through *The Possession of Alba Díaz*. The tentative, burgeoning relationship between Alba and Elías lies at the story's turbulent emotional core and plays heavily into the heart-wrenching twist near the end of the novel. As I always tell my daughter, good storytelling makes you feel something, and *The Possession of Alba Díaz* is the sort of horror novel that's not just content to kick up your fears, it's gonna kick at your heart too.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

COME KNOCKING

Mike Bockoven

Skyhorse

There's something to be said about the type of horror novels that don't have a monster or one "Big Bad," but rather find the horrific within the parameters of human nature. Mike Bockoven did this once before in *Fantasticland*, a *Lord of the Flies*-style horror story that took place entirely in a theme park. He's continued this universe, and his documentary-style storytelling, in his new book *Come Knocking*. Only this time, he's set it in a place where truly anything can happen – the theatre.

DANTE'S PICK

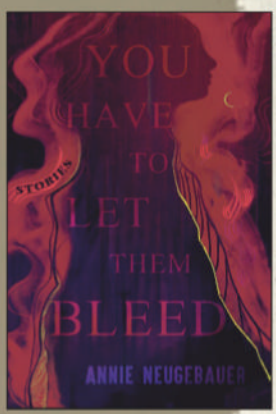
YOU HAVE TO LET THEM BLEED

Annie Neugebauer

Bad Hand Books

Most of the short stories in Annie Neugebauer's debut collection stay close to home, opening the dark cupboards and closets where the most frightening domestic fantasies hide. Childhood fears and the fear of bearing children, a fresh-start new house and a house under an ancient curse, curios filling shelves and a drawer stuffed with junk – all turn up in these truly scary, disturbing tales.

Horror readers still unaware of Neugebauer's mastery are in for a revelation as story after story in *You Have to Let Them Bleed* leaves a deep impression. Eighteen of the nineteen were previously published in magazines and anthologies. "So Sings the Siren" and "Glove Box" were nominated for the Bram Stoker Award.



Those two stories are among the exceptions to Neugebauer's frequent return to domestic themes. There's also a well-drawn description of getting a cavity filled. "Hide" and "What Throat" create new kinds of monsters, while "Redless" reveals a disturbed person's thoughts. And "You Ought Not Smile as You Walk These Woods" and "White Paint" provide fresh twists on an old legend and a clichéd horror trope, respectively.

But it's those home and family themes, most often explored from the perspectives of women and girls, that seem to particularly interest her. What if chaos crept into your all-too-orderly household? What if your husband or mother became ill? What if a strange occurrence tipped over your wobbling marriage? What if you found something super weird in your new house's cellar? These sorts of anxieties are the skeletons on which Neugebauer hangs her stories' grim flesh. "The Baby" especially stands out as a timeless, Kafkaesque reflection of the fears around infant care.

You Have to Let Them Bleed is the perfect appetizer to Neugebauer's debut novella, which will be published later this year. It's also a collection I expect to revisit often.

KARL RICHTER

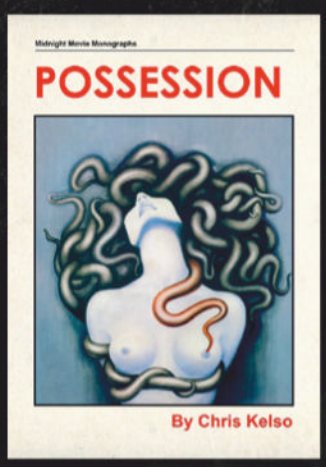
A NEW STUDY OF ANDRZEJ ŻUŁAWSKI'S *POSSESSION* OFFERS AN EMOTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON A FASCINATING CULT HORROR FILM

STILL POSSESSED

BY DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

**MORE THAN FOUR DECADES AFTER ITS PREMIERE, ANDRZEJ ŻUŁAWSKI'S APOCALYPTIC ART-HORROR MELODRAMA *POSSESSION* (1981) CONTINUES TO ENTICE AND INSPIRE. LAST YEAR, IT WAS REMADE IN INDONESIA AS *POSSESSION: Kerasukan*, while the original's female freakout set piece, featuring Isabelle Adjani, was reprised by Nell Tiger Free in *The First Omen*. Meanwhile, the director of *Smile* announced plans to remake the movie starring Robert Pattison, and a book-length study of the film titled *Possession: Dreams of Suffering and Sanity* is coming from PS Publishing this August, as part of its Midnight Movie Monographs series.

"I believe it's an object of undisputed cinematic significance, specifically in terms of it being a unique melange of relationship drama, art house aesthetic, and horror tropes," the book's author, Chris Kelso, tells *Rue Morgue* of his fascination with Żuławski's cult classic. "I can't think of many films more daring in the early '80s. But also, *Possession* feels significant in a more personal way. This film animates so many archetypal masculine fears in a really vivid, rich, metaphorical way. It's irresistible as a subject."



Not surprisingly, Kelso's approach is explicitly personal, a far cry from the kind of academic studies that films such as these typically inspire. It makes sense, considering that *Possession* was a deeply personal project for Żuławski, who was dealing with a stormy breakup at the time and whose feelings about it clearly informed some of the film's more bizarre and harrowing scenes.

"It would be a disservice to the film if all I did was offer another straightforward didactic study of *Possession*," says Kelso. "What is worth talking about lies between the epithelial folds of the film – trying to find the point where the film and my own experience/sensibilities intersect, then offer something authentic and original from there. I suppose what is gained is an emotional perspective on the film."

That said, there is still plenty of theory and analysis within these pages – Freud, Kafka, Lovecraft, Jung, Kristeva, and many other names are invoked, but often tempered with something personal or anecdotal.

"Hopefully," says Kelso, "the reader feels like they're re-experiencing the film with an open, honest friend, instead of a chin-stroking smart-aleck teacher."

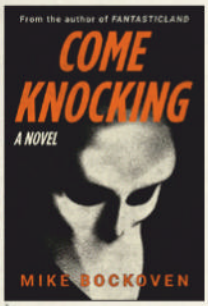
His analyses are enriched by discussions with Fred Tuten (*Possession*'s co-screenwriter), John Peck, and other scholars like Daniel Bird, Ola Salwa, Ewa Mazierska, and Michał Piotr Oleszczyk, who yielded unique insights into Żuławski the man and the artist, as well as providing important context for Poland at that time, artistically and politically. Thanks to them, there are interesting new takes on the film, its director, and the spiritual impact of the city of Berlin. Żuławski's son, Xawery, also a director in his own right (*It Came from the Water*, 2022), gave his blessing to the project, but does not actually feature in the book, at his request. Even so, for Kelso, writing a personal study about another man's personal film proved to be a singular task.

"It was a bit daunting submitting so much of myself to the book," he admits. "We are in an intriguing self-reflective moment as a society. It seems we are finally comfortable testing the rigidity of our own boundaries (and are being encouraged to reappraise our own personal histories). I saw *Possession* as a lens through which to unpack my previous failings as a romantic partner, and even my failings as a friend. I wouldn't have the arrogance to write a straight-up memoir, but I do have permission to gaze at my own reflection in the projections of art. I think the difficulty comes from laying myself open for all to see and just accepting that this book was a necessary step in my own development as a person. Ultimately, it was an opportunity for improvement."

In light of the above, one has to wonder what it is that makes *Possession* so powerful and still relevant for today's artists, audiences, and theoreticians.

Says Kelso: "Apart from offering such a singular cocktail of avant-garde and horror, *Possession* remains powerful because it has a complex relationship at its heart. The relationship in question is fraught, stirred by unpredictable forces. These themes will never go out of season because they are fundamentally human, and that will always interest an audience."

Based on the long-running theatre spectacle *Sleep No More*, which ran in New York City up until a few years ago, *Come Knocking* is a fictionalized version of what would happen if an interactive theatre piece had everything go wrong in one, bloodsoaked night. Moving the setting to LA, the *Come Knocking* show attracts unhinged actors, rowdy audience members, and internet trolls intent on destroying the production – and boy, do they.



Bockoven's work is interesting because his novels are presented almost in the style of a true crime piece. It feels like reading nonfiction at times, with the plot being played out like a jigsaw puzzle; the more accounts you read of those who were at *Come Knocking* that fateful night, the more the story comes together. Rather than just one POV, you get dozens – everyone from the show's dancers to its critics, even using the format of Reddit posts to bring the whole picture into view. It's very impressive when a writer can play with structure like this and still create a horrific scene from all angles. The thrills are worth it too, with every single account of the action ending in visceral gore.

At the end of the day, monsters and the supernatural are fun, but nothing is scarier than human beings at their worst. If illustrating that was Bockoven's goal in writing this book, consider it achieved.

RACHEL MEGHAN

THE SUN ALSO RISES ON CTHULHU

Ernest Hemingway and Jorah Kai
More Publishing

Horror mashups can make for strange bedfellows, such as 2009's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* – a "parody novel" that injects the undead into Jane Austen's 1813 classic. That book bears mentioning here, as it in part inspired *The Sun Also Rises on Cthulhu* – a joining of Ernest Hemingway's 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*, about battered and disaffected young people in the wake of World War I, with Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos. Though unlike *PaPaZ*, it's difficult to label this as parody.

It's not a stretch, for instance, to imagine that the characters in Hemingway's original, who drift aimlessly between cafés and bars, might in their journeys happen across an esoteric artifact or two, or that such an artifact might intrigue them. Hemingway's prose and Lovecraft's cosmic madness mesh better than one might expect, which may have something to do with the fact that both men lived and wrote in the same period, but also comes down to the tactful and mostly serious manner in which contemporary author Jorah Kai blended the material. If there's a quibble to be made, it's that while the story's Lovecraftian intrusions are bolstered by momentum and heaping mounds of atmospheric description – Kai does a commendable job of painting the indescribable in the reader's head – the purposeful meandering pace and dialogue of Hemingway's classic make the earlier parts of the book, at least before all cosmic hell breaks loose, kind of a slog (particularly for readers who might not have the English lit background to understand why it's written like that).

The book contains fantastic black-and-white illustrations (by Benjamin Wang) between each chapter and the narrative ends on an epilogue that gives a fictional backstory to this project involving the author and one of the preceding story's artifacts, which is either clever or cheeky or twee – or perhaps all three.

While not a complete success, *The Sun Also Rises on Cthulhu* is undoubtedly a curious curio for those who enjoy odder genre fare.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

LIBRARY OF THE DAMNED

HEY NANCY, I'LL MISS YOU

I've worked in horror almost half my life and while, in my role as a journalist, I've always sought to maintain a certain amount of professional distance with authors whose work I might cover, it's inevitable that some acquaintances became friends over such a lengthy time. Additionally, for me, there's always been a clear delineation between things I discovered before and after the spooky stuff became my career.

Firmly on the before side is Nancy Kilpatrick's vampire fiction, which I first stumbled across on a bookshelf in Siren, a goth clothing store formerly located on Toronto's Queen Street West. Notably, Nancy was one of the few horror authors I met in person before I darkened these hallowed pages. This is my way of saying "we go way back." And so, it was a huge shock to learn of her death on March 31 at age 78, following a very private battle with lung cancer.

Many people I eulogize here are folks whose work I admire or folks I've interviewed or perhaps shared a drink (or five) with at some genre convention, and while Nancy checks all those boxes, she was also someone with whom I regularly interacted at meetings of our local Horror Writers Association chapter. In fact, I had lunch with her while she was in town last fall; our conversation never touched on health matters, but rather centred on the challenges older authors face in an era where technology has run slipshod over the publishing world they used to thrive in. It was something that had been on Nancy's mind, and it's a conversation I've thought a lot about ever since, because it *is* so important to have grace for those who paved the way for us, even as we continue to barrel unceremoniously into the future.

Maybe you're wondering why I'm telling you all this instead of focusing on Nancy's more than 30 years of genre output – which includes short stories (*Vampyric Variations*, *Thirteen Plus-1 Lovecraftian Narratives*), the novels (*Child of the Night*, *Near Death*, *Revenge of the Vampir King*) that got her dubbed Canada's Queen of Vampire Fiction, *Friday the 13th: Jason X* books, non-fiction (*The Goth Bible*), and more – and that's because I experienced Nancy not just as a writer creating from afar, but as a fellow lifelong traveller in the world of Canadian horror. Furthermore, while I admired her work, I also admired how she spoke her mind and was never afraid to demand the respect that she deserved. In short, Nancy was something of a badass, coming up as she did when horror lit was still very much a boy's club and carving out a place for herself; I'm going to remember her as much for that as any of her books.

Our genre could use more women like Nancy. R.I.P.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

Follow Monica on Substack at libraryofthedamned.substack.com

THE FRIGHT GALLERY

CURATED BY PAIGE REYNOLDS

225

THIS MONTH:

THE MENACING STREET ART OF JAMIE PAUL SCANLON

A RUE MORGUE COLLECTIBLE

There's something to be said for turning the crumbling world into a personal canvas, and artist Jamie Paul Scanlon (also known by his initials, JPS) does just that. You can find his creations leering at you through spaces of urban decay; his startling images – many taken from pop culture and horror movies – turn abandoned buildings and drab spaces into grim galleries for the unsuspecting visitor. Walk through these places and be forever looking over your shoulder…

NAME

Jamie Paul Scanlon

HOMETOWN HAUNT

"I was born and raised in a seaside town known as Weston-super-Mare in the U.K. but nowadays I live near a town called Lohr am Main in Lower Franconia, Germany."

WEAPON OF CHOICE

"Mainly spray paint and hand-cut stencils; although I also implement a lot of freehand in my work."

DEEDS

"I've painted in a lot of places all over the world: New York, Los Angeles, Berlin, Barcelona, and Stavanger. Maybe the most fun part of my career was painting the abandoned Barrow Gurney mental hospital back in 2013."

MY NIGHTMARE FUEL

"My favourite works are always the horror pieces in abandoned places. I've even managed to scare myself with them sometimes."

LAST WORDS

"In a world full of snowflakes, be a flame."

RESTING PLACE

Find Jamie on Instagram: @jps_artist

FOLLOW PAIGE ON INSTAGRAM @PAIGEREYNOLDSART

A DUMPSTER DIVE INTO HORROR'S ODDS & CURIOS

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

BY STACIE PONDER

YOU MAY RECALL THAT BACK IN *RM#223*, I DEDICATED MY COLUMN TO THE QUESTION OF WHO BURIED one Mrs. Pamela Voorhees in *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter*. While I am tempted to spend this column ponderin' over who buried one Jason Voorhees in *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives*, I'm afraid that I've used up my allotted *F13* quota for a while. So, let's talk about *Phantasm*.

See, in response to that column about Mrs. V, I got a kind email from a "dead-icated" *RM* reader who happens to be a funeral director. He, too, wondered who paid for Pamela's burial and headstone. But he had more questions regarding The Tall Man in 1979's *Phantasm*, the resident funeral director as portrayed by the late, great Angus Scrimm. The Tall Man's intimidating, gruff, and cold casket-side manner is the antithesis of what's right for his profession. He's not at all what a grieving family wants or needs in their hour of despair – so how is he still in business?

Well, despite what the Yelp reviews for the services at Morningside Cemetery may say, The Tall Man is really the only service provider in town. So, unless a family plans to bury Gramma at the local Pet Sematary, there's sadly not much to do but endure his scowls and cranky attitude.

That is, of course, if he's not the figure of a teenager's imagination altogether. Sure, it's… you know, a horror movie about grief. But in terms of narrative, *Phantasm* is a film that puts logic and sense as a distant second to mind-bending cool. Maybe it's all a dream. Maybe it's all a dream within a dream. Maybe it's aliens? Does it really matter?

This is a movie where Mike sticks his head between the prongs of a giant tuning fork, sees another dimension, and surmises that The Tall Man is transforming the recently deceased locals into dwarves, who are then forced into slavery on a distant planet riddled with high temperatures and higher gravity.

This is a movie where a man's finger is cut off and said finger wiggles around and bleeds mustard for a few hours before turning into a giant housefly with a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth and murderous intent.

This is a movie where a silver sphere flies around and… okay, I'm sure you get it. The point is, it shouldn't be a huge surprise if The Tall Man doesn't care much about what the locals say about him. They'll be shipped off to that other planet soon enough. But this isn't to say that The Tall Man doesn't warrant questioning and thinking about. On the contrary, there's a detail about him that's been jingling around in the ice cream truck of my mind for ages and ages, and that is the amount of time he spends as his "alter ego," The Lady in Lavender.

The interplanetary labour supply chain would collapse if The Tall Man waited for everyone in town to die of natural causes, so he occasionally transforms into The Lady in Lavender and hangs out at the local dive bar, waiting to get hit on by a townie male, just to speed things up (we assume). She kills him, but that's always *after* they have sex.

It's the "after" in that equation that I find the most curious. Believe me, I am not yucking a yum or shaming a kink or casting any aspersions! I am just saying, the sexnanigans aren't completely necessary to procuring a dead body – she could simply lure a dude in with a "tee hee," then kill the young man in the car in the driveway at Morningside. But she doesn't. She and Tommy finish the deed, *then* she stabs him to death. Jody would have met the same fate were it not for his pesky little brother; he had The Lady's panties in his mouth when they were interrupted.

So hear me out: perhaps all *this* explains why The Tall Man is so cranky when he's at the mausoleum and talking to the recently bereaved, yes? Nursing drinks at the Dunes Cantina, getting hit on, and engaging in a little graveside canoodling and post-canoodling murder seem to be the only parts of the job he truly loves. He may be a lousy funeral director by day, but he's a true boss babe by night. Boy oh *boooooooy*!

Horror Culture

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DEADBEAT AT DAWN

SOUNDTRACK

Mike Pierry and Ned Folkerth

Mystic Vault

Jim Van Bebber's grim and gory chronicle of gang violence in 1980s Dayton, Ohio, comes equipped with an aggressive, scrappy little score from Mike Pierry and Ned Folkerth, and thanks to the good people at Mystic Vault, now you can spin this bad boy on wax. The synth-based music is an in-your-face cacophony that owes much to John Carpenter, only the inspiration is more *Assault on Precinct 13* than *Halloween*. There's a menacing quality to the spare grooves, with synths sometimes ringing out like police sirens or hammering clangs of metal. Other times it sounds like a couple of dudes discovering the pre-programmed drum loops on their synth and having a field day with it, trying to see what sticks. The good news is that the energy translates to both film and score, propelling scenes forward with a decidedly retro momentum. ☠☠☠½ **JS**

THE CASE OF CHARLES DEXTER WARD

SPOKEN WORD

H.P. Lovecraft/Andrew Leman/ Chris Bozzone

Cadabra Records

Escalation – it doesn't just apply to violent crime but also physical media, as horror collectors keep demanding more and more original content. So, with another Lovecraft story to tackle, Andrew Leman at the mic, and Chris Bozzone and Slasher Film Festival Strategy tinkering up another spooky score, what exactly is so different and extreme about Cadabra Records' *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*? It represents the first time the story has been told unabridged and, yes, it takes the whopping eight LPs to tell it. A principal entry in Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, *Dexter Ward* is the longest of the writer's works and it gets proper room to breathe here. The album is adorned with some of the label's most gorgeous commissioned artwork to date, courtesy of Zakuro Aoyama and Santiago Caruso. Housed in a massive *Necronomicon* slipcase, this box set belongs somewhere next to a collection of leatherbound *Weird Tales* magazines. ☠☠☠☠☠ **AVL**

DEATH AND VANILLA

ELECTRONIC

Whistle And I'll Come to You

Fire

Having reimagined scores for *The Tenant* and *Vampyr*, retro-futurist kraut-pop act Death and Vanilla is no stranger to the uncanny. This latest excursion sees the band take on even more esoteric source material: the 1968 made-for-TV adaptation of M.R. James' chilling *Oh, Whistle, And I'll Come to You, My Lad*. If the story's seaside setting – all lapping waves, tumbledown walls, and strange archeological finds – seems at a distance from the band's sleek, urbane sound, the nape-tingling oddness definitely feels tailored to its tastes. Quietly insistent drum patterns, murmured Moog notes, and barely-there drones waft in and out of focus, cohering to form a vague spectral presence rather than anything you can sink your fingers into. Despite its inchoate nature, there's much to enjoy, and since the success of Jonathan Miller's one-off adaptation inspired the BBC's subsequent *A Ghost Story for Christmas* series, we can but hope that Death and Vanilla continues to raid the same dusty archives for further inspiration. ☠☠☠☠½ **AD**

NYTT LAND

FOLK

Songs of the Shaman

Prophecy Productions

In a world that's increasingly devoid of meaning, it's no surprise that some musicians are looking to pre-Christian times for solace, substance, and answers. Adorned with ritualistic performances and utmost respect for ancient tradition, acts such as Wardruna and Heilung have boomed in popularity, opening the door for others to dive into animism, folklore, and traditional instrumentation. Siberia's Nytt Land is one such act, a husband-and-wife duo exploring its homeland's landscape, language, and indigenous beliefs by way of ambient folk music. Here, the pair digs into Siberian shamanic traditions across ten tracks that take the form of spells, summonings, and attempts to commune with the spirit world. Talharpa, mouth harp, and flute are threaded into hypnotic drum patterns, while breathy chants and throat singing form the central image. The results are immersive and strangely cleansing – a sort of psychic salve capable of helping you find calm amid the chaos of modern life. ☠☠☠☠ **AD**

CHARMING DISASTER

GOTH

The Double

(Independent)

Putting an exact label on Charming Disaster's music might prove difficult but "coolest band you've never heard of" seems to be a good start. Seven albums deep, this Brooklyn-based duo draws influence from horror, Victorian culture, the occult, sci-fi, magick, science, and folklore to create layered concept albums and performances. How layered? New album *The Double* can be purchased with a custom "oracle deck" (like a tarot deck) featuring a card for every song in the band's catalogue, which is actually used to determine setlists.

THE SERPENT AND THE RAINBOW

SOUNDTRACK

Brad Fiedel

Varèse Sarabande

If you shuffled out early for Record Store Day this year, you might have been able to walk away with one of the 1800 copies of Varèse Sarabande's "vodou blue" 2xLPs of Brad Fiedel's least talked-about score, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. The backstory: the studio hired about four different composers to do the score for Wes Craven's voodoo horror film but fired all of them before finally calling in Fiedel (*Fright Night*, *The Terminator*) to completely rewrite the music – with only ten days to do it. Calling to mind an early trip to Haiti, Fiedel created an electronic soundscape that is somewhere between ethereal industrial and misanthropic tropical terror. The soundtrack saw a vinyl release back in 1988, and then Varèse Sarabande released a massive CD set in 2021 that included the original film mixes. That's what you get here on wax. Craven's film has never sounded more ominous, powerful, or dead-risingly beautiful. ☠☠☠☠ **AVL**

PODCASTS FROM BEYOND

DERRY PUBLIC RADIO: A STEPHEN KING PODCAST

THEME: Stephen King Catalogue
FORMAT: Conversational
FREQUENCY: Biweekly

Many of us don't have enough reading time to keep up with a regular book club, or simply lack a friend group that would go all-in exclusively on horror novels. Luckily there is *Derry Public Radio: A Stephen King Podcast* to help fill that niche. Operating as a virtual book club, the biweekly podcast has been working through the King library since 2018 and shows no signs of slowing down.

Hosted by SK mega-fans Joshua Kahn, Eve Godot, and C.M. Alexander, each episode begins under the guise of a radio broadcast from the fictional town of Derry before leading into a real-world discussion of a novel or short story. This includes the author's mainstays, such as *Pet Semetary*, *Carrie* and *Doctor Sleep*, but also a variety of lesser-known pieces. A testament to King's tremendous body of work, *Derry Public Radio* has amassed over 175 episodes so far.

Going chapter by chapter, the trio discusses characters, events, and themes while giving personal takes on the story. Judging by the impressive amount of detail they relate, it's clear that the hosts are minutely acquainted with the material. Their vivid descriptions of the people and places that populate King's work almost makes it seem like they're discussing scenes from a movie; the rich imagery allows listeners to follow along even if they've not read the piece in question.

To keep things fresh, some episodes contain interviews with like-minded creatives, including the founders of KingCon, the production team behind *Shining in Misery: A King-Sized Parody* musical, and Anthony W. Northrup, author of *Stephen King – Dollar Baby: The Book*. There are also a wealth of special episodes, like the annual "Merry Derry" Christmas episodes, where the hosts field questions from listeners and play hilarious and disturbing games like "Marry, Fuck, Kill" with a variety of prominent King characters. Getting into the spirit of the season, they also participate in March Madness and pit story elements such as "iconic apocalyptic events" and "deadliest woman" against each other.

As comedians, Kahn and Godot stir up a lot of chaos and laughs, which are tempered by a sense of serenity from Alexander, who balances out the goings-on. While all three hosts speak lovingly about the topics at hand, they're not above poking fun at certain King-isms where needed, which keeps the tone fun and engaging. *Derry Public Radio* is certainly best enjoyed by those who are already fans of the author, but it will also assist those who want to break into King's vast universe but don't know where to start.

JESSICA BUCK

As for the music, the uber-light folk tunes take a lot of getting used to and probably won't have you rushing to the concert hall. Lyrically, references to Dracula, H.G. Wells, and the psychic sciences are enough to pull the rare book connoisseur in deep, but this music is definitely more rainy afternoon coffee shop than drinking blood in the mortuary at midnight. ☠☠☠ **AVL**

GRUESOME

METAL

Silent Echoes

RELAPSE

With this third album, Floridian metalheads Gruesome continue to pay homage to both Death (the band) and death (the stage of life). Having filled its boots with tributes to Death's canonic early entries, *Silent Echoes* leans hard on *Human* – the 1991 masterpiece that saw mastermind Chuck Schuldiner explore more progressive, technical climes. While there's no shortage of gristly crunches, the structures here are more complex with filaments of prog rock and fusion threaded through Daniel Gonzalez's quicksilver solos. Conceptually, too, things are elevated: lyrics reference *Black Mirror*-type views concerning the insidious nature of technology, while the album is also informed by the passing of Sean Reinert – a friend and fellow musician who lent his skills to Cynic and, yes, Death. If *Silent Echoes* is more ambitious than previous releases, the same criticisms can still be levelled: despite being eminently capable, Gruesome is still a facsimile of a band whose superior shadow it finds impossible to escape. ☠☠ **AD**

GWAR

METAL

The Return of Gor Gor

PIT RECORDS

Known for over-the-top theatrics, Virginia-born metal stalwart Gwar is back with *The Return of Gor Gor*, an EP named after a fictional T-Rex and consisting of both studio and live tracks. The release kicks off with "The Circus Train Disaster" and, despite the band's theatrical charisma, it ultimately degenerates into exactly that. Gwar's approach to horror is mostly through humour, whether cracking silly jokes about crack or of a scatological nature, but four decades into its existence it feels like the band should be exploring something more with its lyrics and stage banter. Ultimately, more effort could have been put into the writing, which centres on dinosaurs, sex work, and politics (overusing an infamous Trump voice clip ad nauseum on the filler track "America Must Be Destroyed," for example). The EP ends on the completely random note of a live version of the 26-year-old "Fishfuck," which smells even more rotten with age. ☠☠ **JD**

CRYPTOPSY

METAL

An Insatiable Violence

SEASON OF MIST

Cryptopsy's ninth record is everything you expect it to be, especially drummer extraordinaire Flo Mounier shifting gears with the precision of a skilled surgeon – or perhaps Jack the Ripper. Vocalist Matt McGachy's lyrics are pitch black, ranging from the bleak toxicity of social media to crossing ways with author J.G. Ballard (*Crash*) and David Cronenberg's musings on technology and human psychology – all delivered with guttural depth and high screams. Not to be outdone, bassist Oli Pinard's heavy chord dexterity makes the grinding tech-death half-hour of *An Insatiable Violence* even more violent. We even get graceful nods to early Cryptopsy, with a Mike DiSalvo cameo and cover art by Martin Lacroix (1976-2024). Old school fans will love this album, as should folks into Voïvod and Meshuggah. A rewarding Canadian extreme metal experience, both musically and intellectually. ☠☠☠☠ **KG**

A GARDEN STATE GOTHIC

IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE NEW JERSEY WOODS TODAY, YOU'RE IN FOR A BADASS THEATRE PRESENTATION! *THE DEVIL AND DAISY DIRT* IS PERHAPS BEST DESCRIBED AS A BLUEGRASS VAUDEVILLE SHOW THAT MARRIES music, theatre, and gnarly monster effects for Pine Barrens hillbillies, performed in barns, breweries, churches, and even a couple actual theatres.

But why New Jersey? What does the Garden State have to do with bluegrass music? Well, as writer/musician Joe Fili once explained in the October 1984 issue of *Bluegrass Unlimited*: "[New Jersey has] the largest single wilderness area east of the Mississippi, the famed Pine Barrens, replete with moonshiners, monsters (the Jersey Devil), volumes of early American history and some of the finest country people imaginable. The early settlers of New Jersey, like their counterparts south of the Mason-Dixon line, brought with them a rich and enduring musical heritage from the Old World. As string music and country music evolved in America, Jersey lost no ground in forming and nurturing a folk music tradition of its own."

The brainchild of Alex Dawson, a Rutgers professor in creative writing with a focus on folklore and the dark fantastic, *The Devil and Daisy Dirt* tells the tale of the titular diner waitress who discovers the wounded Jersey Devil and risks everything – including her life – to save it.

Dawson, however, says it best: "Think Pine Barrens-set *Our Town* meets *E.T.*, with a shoulder-shot cryptid instead of a stranded extraterrestrial, deer hunters instead of federal agents, and a portal that opens above the Apple Pie Hill fire tower after a midnight lightning strike instead of an alien mothership shaped like a Christmas tree ornament. All backed by a high lonesome sound."

That sound comes courtesy of Americana/folk singer-songwriter Arlan Feiles, who not only wrote and performs all of the songs for the production but also performs as the Balladeer. The story bounces back and forth between him and Dawson as the Narrator, along with a number of other characters. While the core of the music is bluegrass, the score goes well beyond into soundscape and experimental territory.

"[Arlan] wrote the lyrics to the intro song 'The Devil's Diner,' the outro song 'The Devil and Daisy Dirt,' and a song in the middle, 'The Devil's Meat,'" says Dawson. "Songs that occupy the same world as the show, and loosely reference the characters, but don't propel the story forward. I wrote the lyrics to the dozen or so narrative songs throughout, as well as Daisy's duet with Arlan at the end. It's a bit of a murder ballad, in which Daisy fantasizes about cutting up the hunters who harass her at the diner."

You might say horror and dark folklore are part of Dawson's DNA. Though he's not from the Pine Barrens originally, his upbringing as a rancher's stepson in Alabama was familiar. And now, as an academic at Rutgers and moonlighting as a theatre producer, he gets to combine it all, day in and night out. It's perhaps unsurprising, then, that *The Devil and Daisy Dirt* ultimately moves toward academic, societal messages that are bigger than the Jersey Devil monster.

"In the production, the Jersey Devil is mythical, not monstrous – a wounded creature we feel for," he says. "In *The Devil and Daisy Dirt*, like in so many creature features, the 'monsters' are the men. Meaning, of course, that the source of suffering and torment is not supernatural, but rather the inherent capacity for wickedness within humanity, within men. And, yes, there is a message of female empowerment, the dismantling of patriarchal structures, ending with the idea that Daisy might just take control of her life and achieve her full potential."

The Devil and Daisy Dirt will be playing across New Jersey and the eastern United States for the remainder of the year.

Visit thedevilanddaisydirt.blogspot.com and treat yourself to a Garden State Gothic good time!

PLAY DEAD

NOW PLAYING > GHOST FREQUENCY, MOROI

GHOST FREQUENCY

PC
PIT Games/Serafini Productions

Does real-life ghost-hunting leave you feeling perpetually disappointed? Have you ever wished your EMF meter pointed to actual paranormal phenomena? Well, *Ghost Frequency*, a new budget title from Tokyo-based Serafini Productions, is broadcasting straight at you.

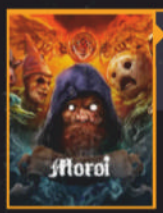
Players take on the role of Mark, one half of an expert ghost-hunting duo, while his partner Emily guides him from off-site through a radio. The mission: figure out what happened to your friends, Lisa and Ben, who disappeared while investigating the abandoned property.

Players mostly see the world through Mark's trusty video camera, and like many real-life ghost hunts, this one kicks off with a careful walkthrough of the place – opening drawers, zooming in on objects, looking for evidence. As Mark navigates the building's odd clutter, including a disproportionately large number of mostly empty cupboards and armoires, standard haunting indicators begin to manifest, from odd creaks and knocks and bangs to electrical surges and disembodied breathing. Mark, of course, has more tools at his disposal than just a camera; there's a heat sensor, an EMF meter to detect places with "high electromagnetic stress," and an EVP digital recorder for auditory spectral activity. Continue the investigation, locate Lisa's journal entries and other clues, and try to stay alive long enough to uncover the mystery.

Ghost Frequency utilizes its multi-storey environment exceedingly well as players move back and forth through its rooms as the haunting evolves, until faced with full-fledged dangerous ghosts. But before that, a good twenty minutes or so is spent building tension (bolstered by spooky atmospheric drones in the place of a soundtrack), leaving players well-primed for jump scares when the first chairs are thrown. All in all, *Ghost Frequency* offers up a good approximation of what it'd be like to go on a ghost hunt that actually delivered the haunted goods, so suit up!

MONICA S. KUEBLER

HEADSHOTS: A+ ATMOSPHERE, SOLID USE OF POPULAR HAUNTING TROPES
MISFIRES: LACK OF SAVE SYSTEM FORCES SINGLE-SITTING PLAY, UNEVEN VOICE ACTING



MOROI

PC
Violet Saint

Moroi, a new fixed camera, top-down, grimdark fairy tale-style game, purports to offer a "hellscape designed to distort any semblance of normalcy." And just as that flavourful promo text promises, the game's chock-full of grisly set pieces, talking skeletons, frenetic combat, and more puzzles than you can shake a severed head at.

Moving through the various levels of the Cosmic Engine, where your character is trapped, requires both quick reflexes and smarts, as logic and elemental puzzles are core to gameplay. Most are fun; some are wonderfully, morbidly dark; and a few are so painfully obtuse that one's patience will be sorely tested. Combat, meanwhile, is easy to pick up but nigh impossible to master, being as odd and janky as it is, while also relying heavily on quick dodges and accurate aiming. Button mashing only gets you dead here.

Enemies tend to show up in waves as part of large skirmishes rather than in small groups. While this adds a certain sameness to the action, it also propels the game along without tying players up with superficial battles – unless you get stuck on a boss.

Most of the game's boss fights involve learning a trick or mechanic, making them feel like puzzles in their own right, and because *Moroi* is strictly linear, this can be progress stopping. Turning down the difficulty helps but doesn't spare players from the combat issues or getting snagged on the environment.

With its snarky dialogue, bouts of *Monty Python*-esque absurdity, impressive world-building, and strange, surreal, gorgeously gory environments, there's much to laud in *Moroi*, but tweaks are needed to realize its full potential. That said, if you're looking to travel through tunnels made of living pipe beasts, vomit blood into the mouths of unholy priests, and wear the head of a defeated enemy – it's all there for you… but only if you like puzzles, as that part's non-negotiable.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

HEADSHOTS: WEIRD, SURREAL, IMPRESSIVELY GORY WORLD; AMUSING DIALOGUE AND NPC ENCOUNTERS
MISFIRES: SOME PUZZLES WAY TOO OBTUSE; FRUSTRATING, JANKY COMBAT

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THE BOOK-VS-MOVIE DEBATE HAS BEEN A STANDBY AMONG HORROR FANS SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL. THIS ISSUE, WE HOPE TO LAY THE ARGUMENT TO REST ONCE AND FOR ALL BY INVITING TWO OF OUR WRITERS TO ENTER THE RING AND DUKE IT OUT!

ARE GHOST STORIES BETTER SUITED TO FICTION OR FILM?

FICTION!

JERRY J SAMPSON

"Ultimately, there remains a lingering pit of disappointment when watching most ghost stories depicted in film."

VS

FILM!

ADAM CLARKE

"Your imagination probably sucks compared to the combined imaginations of hundreds of artists who work to realize spooky ghosts on film."

AS SOMEONE WHO WRITES BOTH FICTION AND FILM, I HAVE DABBLED IN SPINNING GHOSTLY YARNS IN BOTH FORMATS, LARGELY TO EXPLORE MY PERSONAL fear of isolation and being lost and forgotten after death. The power of the ghost story lies largely in the dread – more in psychological desolation than physical threat – and there is plainly more room to build that dread with the written word than shot on film. Simply put, we're given more time and space in fiction in every possible respect, to create the complex interwoven layers of otherworldly desire and vengeful rage that ghost stories yearn to convey.

Film's paramount rule is "show, don't tell," and the ghost story is easily the hardest subgenre to tackle successfully in 90 minutes. The impulse to rely on CGI and jump scares aside, depicting the anguish of the afterlife – whether living with ghosts or as one – requires an engagement with the performances that turns off the brain and turns on the heart. The audience must connect with those being haunted on a deep, visceral level, one that allows us to forgive the fact that film simply can't *show* the ghost in any truly satisfying way. We must feel the terror of being haunted as well as the desperation of the entity that haunts. There are, of course, examples of films that excel at building and maintaining the necessary dread – *The Sixth Sense*, *The Orphanage*, and Mike Flanagan's copious output comes to mind – but ultimately there remains a lingering pit of disappointment when watching most ghost stories depicted in film.

Fiction, on the other hand (good fiction, that is), paints enough of an outline that one's imagination forms a picture more vivid than the most sophisticated CGI could dream of. Through words, we are personally invited to enter the house, step inside the memories of characters, understand how it feels to die and not pass on, or to wake in the middle of the night within the nightmarish cage of disbelieving one's own eyes. Ultimately, the mind is more powerful (and frankly, far darker) than what we are able to show on film so when it comes to ghost stories, the pen is mightier!

THE AGE-OLD QUESTION OF WHETHER GHOSTS ARE BEST EXPERIENCED ON THE PAGE OR ONSCREEN HAS A SIMPLE ANSWER: WE WANT TO *SEE* CREATURES, not read about 'em! Yes, imagination is unlimited, but I use enough of my imagination when I have to pretend to see what Zak Bagans sees in all 30 of his ghost-hunting shows. At least with those shows, I get to squint at blurry night-vision footage of a door: written fiction offers me even less than Bagans does… for shame!

Onscreen, we have unforgettable sights of ghosts doing their thing, from the implied antics of *The Changeling*'s bouncing ball to the elaborate cast of decaying denizens in Peter Jackson's *The Frighteners* to the ghastly CGI spectres routinely fought by the Warrens in the *Conjuring* series. As for prose, well… it's just words and you. Books tap into imagination, yes, but unless you're a gifted creative yourself, your imagination probably sucks compared to the combined imaginations of hundreds of artists who work to realize spooky ghosts on film.

Ever read *Ring*? Did you retain any of it? The Japanese and American films are celebrated for their iconic depictions of Sadako/Samara. Books can't compete with that. Even Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* wouldn't have endured the way it did were it not for the generations of screen adaptations depicting the ghosts.

Don't believe that visuals make or break a ghost story? What would you rather have: a Blu-ray of *Ghostbusters* or the *Ghostbusters* novelization where you can create your own version of Stay Puft through the power of make-believe? Blech! Ever read *Casper, The Friendly Ghost* comics? Here's a thought experiment: remove the visuals. Not so fun now, is it? No one wants to read a *Casper* novel! That'd put you to sleep faster than a Casper mattress.

Big Prose is trying to influence how you think about ghosts. Don't fall for the lies of the Library Industrial Complex. When you're out of ideas, the last place you should turn is a good book!

If you believe reading is the superior way to experience ghost fiction, allow me to reveal that there's a ghost behind you right now. Brr. Chilling stuff, dear reader. Wake me when Ghost House Pictures options this VS entry for a three-movie deal.

LAST ISSUE'S WINNER

AS VOTED BY YOU ON FACEBOOK

WHAT IS THE MOST QUINTESSENTIALLY CANADIAN HORROR FILM EVER MADE?

MY BLOODY VALENTINE (1981)	*ROCK 'N' ROLL NIGHTMARE* (1987)
95%	5%

MY BLOODY VALENTINE IS THE MOST QUINTESSENTIALLY CANADIAN HORROR FILM EVER MADE!

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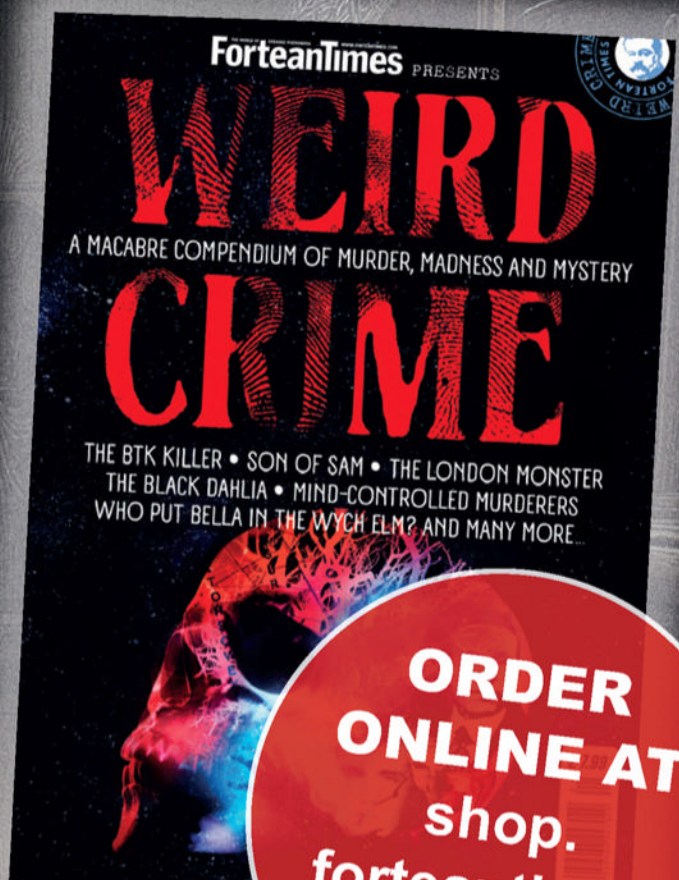
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